

Art in America

REVIEWS Apr 1, 2019

Kelly Akashi

LOS ANGELES

at François Ghebaly

by Leah Ollman



Kelly Akashi:
Submersion, 2019,
stainless steel and
hand-blown glass, 56
by 11 by 11 inches; at
François Ghebaly.

Photo Robert
Wedemeyer.

Kelly Akashi's hand was everywhere in this ensnaring show, and not just implicitly, in that the Los Angeles–based artist made its sculptural contents, but explicitly, too. Throughout, her hand, cast in stainless steel, appeared as an agent of inquiry, an autonomous empirical tool. It probed, nested, and squeezed, a surrogate eye and synecdochical I.

Movement through the spiral layout of the gallery spaces registered as a subtle, experiential echo of the imagery within, much of which took the form of nautilus, conch, whelk, and drill shells with twisting inner chambers. There was no programmatic progression from the scientific to the erotic, but the work intrigued in its encompassing of both extremes. The first gallery featured two installations in which rectangular, open-shelf structures in red oak frame and support an assortment of objects, bringing to mind cabinets of curiosities, orderly housings for the wondrous. In one of the installations, *Spirit Complex* (all works 2019), three conical, clear glass vessels fitted in holes in the top of the shelving unit suggest at once lab equipment and something vaguely bodily, a tail or horn. A coiled heap of slender rope rests like a sleeping snake on a shelf below, passing through it to suspend a gorgeous blown-glass shell form in smoky amber, its voluptuous mouth agape. In the other installation, *Body Complex*, Akashi's hand, immortalized in steel and sunk into a cushion of rose-colored glass, cups a sprouting, decaying cut onion. On the bottom level, old anatomical illustrations of the human torso's interior are overlaid with clear glass shells—delicate protective cover over the skinless machinery, or additional organs swelling from the chest cavity.

“Figure Shifter,” as the show was titled, abounded in

dualities, multiplicities, changes in form. On the wall of the darkened second gallery, a looping ten-minute video projection drew, in light, a continuous sequence of shells emerging from nothingness, transforming, and dissolving back into nothingness, the work suggesting a time-lapse peek at evolution. That same space contained four industrial-looking pedestals—steel poles with matching circular bases and display platforms—holding sculptures of sensual encounter between Akashi's cast hand and pieces of blown glass. In the most haunting of them, *Ripple*, fingers of the upturned hand curl up into the broad bottom—the buttocks—of a clear glass bowl. Like a membrane with memory, the glass is molded around the fingers' stimulating reach. Akashi, who also works frequently with wax, flaunts glass's provisional solidity. However firm and still it obviously is, the glass in these sculptures retains the appearance and effect of a liquid, the wet, malleable skin of a bubble.

Akashi explores not just the erogenous boundaries between inside and outside, but also the perceptual experience of comprehending a subject from different physical angles and in different materials. In the third gallery space, the center of the spiral, three large blown-glass spheres with handsome netting patterns hung head-high or higher. Each was suspended by a rope that extended up and over a different wall, to drop down into a previously traversed room, where it wrapped around the wrist or through the fingers of one of Akashi's cast hands. When, as in several places, the strands are separated, they hang with the uncanny power of tresses in myth and fairy tale. The three installations could not be seen whole, but only over time and through motion. Retracing our steps, we could see the parts we'd encountered before but with new awareness of the larger idea they belong to—an elegant reminder of the spiral path that knowledge takes, circling ever around and upward.