

REVIEW - 10 JAN 2017

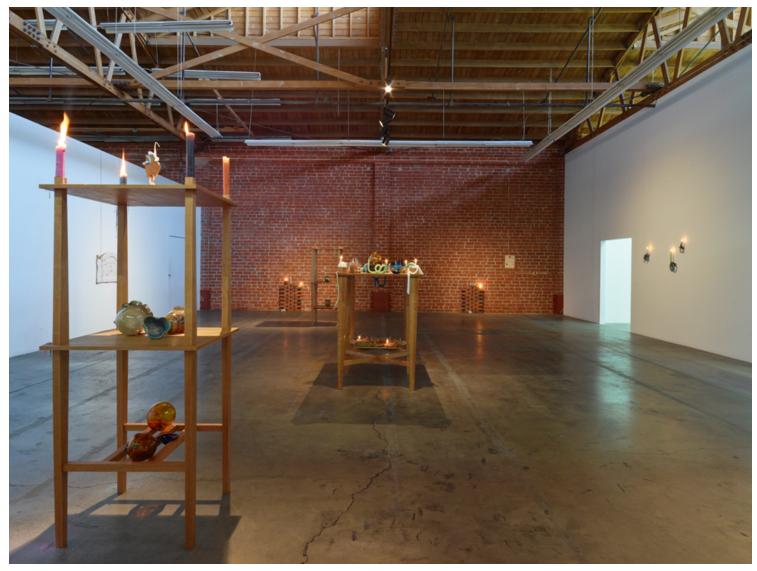
Kelly Akashi

François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, USA BY EVAN MOFFITT

'Now I am ready to tell how bodies are changed into other bodies,' Ovid famously wrote in *Metamorphoses*. Like the bard I found myself bewitched by bodies in transformation when I visited Kelly Akashi's show at François Ghebaly, 'Being as a Thing'. A singular alchemist, Akashi seems to smelt her sculptures in a furnace much older than mankind.

The show centres around four blonde-lacquered shelving units, Arrangement I-III and Activity Table (all works 2016), dripping with candle wax and gooey glass sculptures, like altars for some New Age religion. Arrangement I is laden with lumpy glass balloons in brown, blue and pink; I imagined Akashi inflating their molten cores like Jean Simeon Chardin's Boy Blowing Bubbles (ca. 1734). The table's legs break its surface, extending up several feet, where they are garlanded with candles – some lit – like bunches of drying herbs. On Activity Table, the candles assume even wilder forms, twisting like hideously gnarled tubers or cascading over corners like skeins of silken hair. The glass balloons reappear here, one resembling a burnt-out Edison bulb, resting atop a rye-dark purple cake of

soapy wax. Other, more even forms lend the arrangement their placid presence; one, a ribbed glass cucumber, glistens like a brand-new dildo.



Kelly Akashi, 'Being as a Thing', 2016, exhibition view, François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Courtesy: François Ghebaly, Los Angeles; photograph:

Marten Elder

At sundown each night, the candles are lit, and Akashi's precious craft begins to liquefy. By the time I visited the gallery, two weeks into the run of the show, table legs were caked with drips of hardened wax. The air was filled with a sweet, organic fragrance. The ice blue core of Wax Candle (North) had burnt a mottled purple, difficult to distinguish from the bronze cast candle that held it in place – two coiled, nesting turds. As Wax Candle's flame snaked up towards the ceiling, an ashy bruise grew on the white gallery wall, and I imagined for a moment that its scorched plaster might embalm me there alive.

Two large cracks in the gallery floor have sprouted bronze-cast weeds, covered in hand-cut and etched copper leaves. *Tall Weed* and *Hairy Weed* are meticulously finished works, but like the melting candle wax they refer to an entropic drive in Akashi's work. What is a weed but a maligned imperfection? These sculptures celebrate the beautiful chaos of the wild – those parts of the natural world that art, for most of its history, has tried to pacify. A series of ghostly chromogenic photograms, resembling the wormhole in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*,

are like microscopic cross-sections of these unruly organisms. Akashi revels in nature's asymmetry. Her small labours reveal a deep love not for part, but for whole. She worships not just the flower, but its entire messy ecosystem.



Kelly Akashi, *Hairy Weed*, 2016, bronze, copper and plant ash, 8 x 8 x 69 cm. Courtesy: the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles; photograph: Marten Elder

In its title, 'Being as a Thing' at once recalls Martin Heidegger and the mind-body problems of cognitive philosophy. What would it be like to exist as an unconscious object, a mute mineral or fruit? Akashi's sculptures hint at the answer. Her passion for materials imbues each with a kind of soul, animating their forms. Be Me (Japanese-Californian Citrus), a stainless steel cast of a pockmarked orange with a jolly top-knot, sits in a square window cut in one of the gallery's walls like a kind of self-portrait, its title referring to the artist's Japanese-American heritage and upbringing in California. Two loosely-packed stacks of bricks, ways of being (arched, extended) and ways of being (figure), offer small votive objects in wax and iridescent molten lead, dripping between the cracks, quietly thriving in small spaces. Animal, vegetable, mineral – each malformed in different ways, each beautifully and uniquely imperfect, each in a state of continual transformation.