Contradictory Objects

On the materiality and design of cameron clayborn's sculptures

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The sculptures of cameron clayborn might be larger than us but they might also be so small and inconspicuous that initially we don't even notice them in an exhibition. Both geometric bodies and biomorphic structures are discernible in their design. The works stand in the room and confront us. Others hang on the wall or from the ceiling. They repose immovably in themselves but sometimes connect with one another or with their surroundings. What they have in common is that they claim their place with a calm persistence and sometimes even defend it in a challenging and aggressive manner. clayborn uses products from the DIY market for their sculptures, sometimes from textile wholesalers; in other words, materials that previously most often possessed no established meaning. As this brief characterization has already shown, the works possess an inherent liveliness despite their simple, sometimes artificial nature and their abstract form—not the only contradictions and antagonisms in clayborn's objects.

The early works of cameron clayborn were conceived of for the wall. The work *toolholder* (2015), for example, consists of a light-gray, glittering vinyl strip that is fastened at the top edge with two metal rails. At the apex of the width is a metal pipe, the weight of which forms a fold inclining forward. The title "toolholder" leaves the question of the relationship of the three elements—metal rails, vinyl width, metal pipe—with one another open. Do the metal rods hold the piece of vinyl and the pipe, or does "toolholder" refer to the plastic width that bears the metal pipe as a "tool"? Another later work from the *toolholder* series from 2018 poses new questions. A black, glittering width of vinyl hangs down from the wall on a steel rail. The plastic strip leads toward the bottom into a roll filled with pink insulating material. The smooth, dark surface of the vinyl contrasts with the soft, bright insulating material. For this work, the designation "toolholder" appears to refer clearly to the metal rail, because it does in fact carry the rest of the work. At the same time, it remains unclear what kind of aid or tool this might be. Here it is suggested that the notion of a "tool" is of particular significance to the artist. clayborn principally understands art as an aid for transferring emotions, experiences and memories into a form by way of processed materials. In this way, the works become containers for psychological processes and reactions.

With the work group of the *cushioncontainerbags* (2017), clayborn's works left the wall and expanded into the space. Some of these are free-standing sculptures made of vinyl, the form of which is reminiscent of a cylinder tapered toward the top. As the title suggests, others remind one of cushion-like objects—some of them even have loops like bags. With this series, clayborn began to compile several works into groups. The works refer to the human body. Their dimensions are thus oriented to the extremities of both clayborn and their father (clayborn examines the content of both relationships in the works). Its coloring continues to refer to clayborn's skin color. In performances, clayborn in turn places themself and their own body into a relationship with the works, as, for example, when they incorporate these into athletic exercises or dance performances as props or uses them as a stage (*Bawdy Builder 1&2*, 2017/18). The flexibility of the extremities thereby emphasizes the immovability of the sculptures all the more clearly.

Despite their steadfastness, the *cushioncontainerbags* seem rather soft. In contrast, the *roompiercers* are among the most solid and hardest of clayborn's sculptures. They consist of short, pointed metal rods projecting into the space. Some of the *roompiercers* have other sculptures hanging from them, which are in turn designated as "tools," as is the case with *roompiercer (with tool)* from 2019, a curved, black, round steel form. Coated with a light-brown vinyl shell, the folds evoke connotations of human skin.

The *roompiercers* might be rather small. However, they can be assigned an important function in the context of an exhibition. The stand of clayborn's Simone Subal Gallery at Art Basel 2021, for which clayborn was distinguished with the Baloise Art Prize, makes this clear. The booth consisted of three large-format sculptures from the *homegrown* group and the floor work *expansioncord #1* (2021). The arrangement of the four works formed a course through which the viewers had to find their way. The walk through the stand was made even more difficult by three *roompiercers* whose spikes warned the audience to keep a distance. Visitors were thus guided subtly but emphatically. They had to be careful to avoid coming too close to either the sculptures in the space, the noose of the *expansioncord* on the floor or the sharp *roompiercers* on the walls.

clayborn also entangles viewers in the works of the *homegrowns* series in a collision of curious attraction and respectful distance. These tall but flat sculptures have two different sides. While one surface consists of an uneven white structure—a material known as "popcorn ceiling"—the other was produced from blue-flecked insulation made of chopped-up remnants of denim fabric. Holes in the trunk of the *homegrowns* make it possible to look through. Short capsules like feelers protrude at the edges. This makes the works appear like gigantic cocoons of insects, magnified micro-organisms or extraterrestrial lifeforms.

Because the form of the *homegrowns* expands toward the top, they appear to stand on only a small edge or point on the floor. Added stability is provided by metal ropes, with which they are fastened to the ceiling. While the seemingly

unstable distribution of weight calls for viewers to keep their distance, at the same time the audience is attracted by both the constitution and the surface to have a closer look at the works. In this way, clayborn generates an interplay of distance and proximity, solidness and fragility, corporeality and abstraction.

clayborn's works increasingly seek contact with themselves and their surroundings, which was evident in this year's exhibition in the Simone Subal Gallery in New York. The works gathered under the title *mothership in Malvern* revolved around clayborn's memories of their grandmother's house in Malvern, a small town in Arkansas. Besides a series of drawings that were hung unframed in clusters on the walls with a variety of hanging mechanisms, the work *double dutch* (2022) could be seen: three brown, cellular bodies of fabric, strings protruding from anus-like openings connected with one another. In the case of the also presented work *homegrown #4* (2022), the wires no longer served to merely hold the sculptures. One rope reached like a tentacle for the pipe system located in the exhibition space, as if the work wanted to tap into the liquid inside the pipe. clayborn's new sculptures seem even livelier thanks to this interaction.

The encounter with the sculptures of cameron clayborn can evoke a variety of different and opposing sensations and ideas in us. As materializations of internal processes, they are as contradictory as our wavering emotional world itself—and, like emotions, they are too powerful for us to ignore. "Feelings are facts," Yvonne Rainer claimed. cameron clayborn would respond that "feelings are forms."