

Rochelle Goldberg:
Pétroleuse
Éclair, Berlin
April 28 – June 17, 2018
by *Aryen Hoekstra*

Upon entering Éclair's storefront gallery, the space's former life as a succession of functioning bars is immediately evident. The right wall of the front room is decorated in small bronze-coloured glass tiles, lending to the exhibition, on a sunny afternoon, the warm shimmer of a newly minted penny. The remaining walls are a combination of cracking and peeling plaster and paint, architectural remnants that give way to speculation about a series of hastily completed renos and even quicker exits. Galleries such as Éclair, which opt to leave the spaces they inhabit intact rather than rolling everything over in white, are an increasingly common and needed break from the conventions of the white-cube's so-called neutral display strategies. As well as acknowledging that this supposed "neutrality" was always a myth, they also offer artists a site against which to respond, often producing results that wouldn't otherwise have been generated. Other examples of less conventional exhibition spaces include Long Island City's SculptureCenter, a former trolley repair shop, and Montreal's Parisian Laundry, a former industrial laundry, both of which have given host to solo exhibitions by Rochelle Goldberg in the past two years. What differentiates Éclair from these larger industrial spaces is its intimacy; bars are built to house bodies, not objects or manufacturing. Perhaps in part, it is because of this that Goldberg's exhibition *Pétroleuse* feels especially bodily in this setting.

Éclair's history also provides a fitting context for Goldberg not only to continue her ongoing investigation of the material, economic and geopolitical properties of oil, but to explicitly consider the violent relationship of human bodies to industrialization's most contested resource. The *Pétroleuses* was the name given to a group of female supporters of the

Paris Commune who were the subject of a popular rumour that claimed they had been involved in the burning down of private and public buildings in the Commune's final days. The Paris Commune sought to form a socialist government in Paris following the defeat of Napoleon III, holding power for about two-and-a-half months in 1871 before being defeated by the French national army. After Paris had been recaptured by the Loyalists, word circulated that a group of working-class women, sympathetic to the Commune, had thrown bottles of lit petroleum (early Molotov cocktails) into the cellar windows of buildings across Paris in a final act of defiance against the Versailles government. These rumours were of course untrue, merely an attempt to paint the Communards as unnatural, destructive brutes. Perhaps the plans of the Commune too were first hatched in a bar – a gathering place for bodies set upon a collective revolutionary act. In *Pétroleuse*, the often-abstract realities and ramifications of petro-politics are drawn closer to the body, with oil acting as a lubricating agent for radical transformation.

Retained from the building's previous use is the division of the space into two connected yet distinct rooms, and Goldberg has effectively created two connected yet distinct installations. In the front, the tiled wall supports one edge of a well-worn rug slumped against it, its design so badly faded from use that it is a challenge to recognize anything of its original Baroque patterning. A subtle narrative can be found ingrained in its tired fibres: a luxury object removed from a bourgeois home and repurposed once its value had expired. A segment of the rug has been cut away and covered, in part, with a plastic sheet. Layered between the plastic sheet and the rug is a grouping of glass bowls pushed towards the wall and filled with water that has spilled out onto the plastic covering. Added to the water is a littering of gold glitter that has begun to break apart, producing an oily residue that stretches across the surface of the liquid. Its appearance verges on the alchemical, mixed together to produce something more than its constituent parts, a volatile concoction. Around the bowls is a collection of mouldy celeriac bulbs pierced with bronze casts of wicks, alluding to a potential destructive act.



Brie Ruais, *Attempting to Hold the Landscape*, installation view, 2018
IMAGE COURTESY OF COOPER COLE GALLERY, TORONTO

The rear space is somewhat smaller but has been doubled in appearance by the addition of a set of mirrored tiles that reflect an existing set left by one of the previous owners. Here, two smaller rugs appear, as equally worn as that in the front, again covered with bulbous celeriac bombs, and an arrangement of LED lights that gesture toward lines of connection like an excavated subterranean root system. Standing above is a vertical armature, shrouded in gauzy silk and topped with the bronze mask of a woman's face, eyes closed, turned towards the gallery entrance.

While researching the accused female incendiaries of the Paris Commune and the revolutionary government they hoped to form, the word that kept springing to my mind was the Greek *polis*, which literally translates to city, but which can also mean a body of citizens. The Paris Commune was an attempt at socialist self-governance within the space of a city, but in the context of Goldberg's exhibition I'm more curious about the body of citizens that gathered to produce it, however briefly. Standing in a space that bears the traces of a life that was once a bar, questions emerge that might not have otherwise been generated. How might bodies gather, connect and work together toward a politics that extends itself through interconnectivity? What shift takes place when a collective movement is ascribed the attributes of a single body rather than a collection of individuals? Goldberg's exhibition oscillates between the two, as the multiple becomes the singular and vice versa through historical reference and material enactment. In Reza Negarestani's ficto-theory-thriller novel *Cyclonopedia: Complicity With Anonymous Materials*, oil is described as the lubricant of all historical and political narratives. Goldberg's *Pétroleuse* is steeped in both, adding to this that oil might also be productive as an emulsifying agent, capable of dissolving the singular into the collective. Here, such a mixture unearths petro-politics from the hidden, the subterranean and the universal to something more visible and particular: binding and coating bodies to one another until boundaries leak away, and providing the material means to produce a collective action.

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