

Snakes on a Train

Ruba Katrib

In Rochelle Goldberg's exhibition *The Plastic Thirsty*, sculptures of aquatic beings are served up as interlocutors addressing a complex set of relations. In one instance, a severed fish head resting in a pan simmers in a dehydrated landscape, provoking the basic question of how a head without a body came to be. For Goldberg, thirst, a biologically vital need, is central to this examination, driving both animate and inanimate things. The fish in Goldberg's exhibition operate in the ambiguous space of need, both as entities that have independent lives and requirements of their own and as commodities for human consumption and use. As the exhibition title suggests, the artist's forms and materials are expressions of deficiency—corporeal and alimantal—and provoke the urge to reverse it.

Goldberg's narrative is structured by an accumulation of substitutions that perform a chain of events. A core logic tracked and derailed throughout the exhibition is located in Goldberg's liminal steel abstraction of the American 4-4-0, the steam locomotive that fueled the expansion of the United States in the early 1800s. The advent of the transcontinental line connected coasts and granted access to goods and resources in order to hasten their consumption. The nineteenth-century railroad profoundly changed American industry and landscape. The impact of the train on all life in and around its path remains incomparable, even as our fascination shifts to newer technologies. Nodding to its form through a hollowed-out sculpture, Goldberg presents the machine not as a ruin but as a foundational phantom of power that continues to haunt contemporary transport and technology.

The interconnectivity of things and humans triggered by the train engine informs much of Goldberg's material inquiry. In her sculptures, she often combines organic and inorganic elements, causing them to slip through states of ephemerality and endurance. The abject contour of her works shifts over time according to the ecologies they initiate, whether based on the crude oil that gives off a noxious odor as it evaporates, or chia seeds that sprout and/or die. Entangled arrangements of fiber-optic fibers incorporate light as a surrogate for information. Simultaneously, the snakeskin surfaces impressed on Goldberg's ceramic sculptures insinuate a different kind of movement—the shedding of tissue suggests the mutability and malleability of biological matter. The surfaces are indented with fingerprints that frequently extend into fingers or hands. Touch is integral. The ceramic retains its behavior as clay, but the reflective finish suggests the “hands-off” effect of industrial processing. While solidifying a state of fluidity, the metallic quality disguises the production process, rendering the pieces' haptic materiality remote and unfamiliar.

The human-scale fishlike forms that inhabit the exhibition are composed of vertebral forms constructed from steel armatures. The hybrid creatures are further filled out with large metallized ceramic heads, tails, and flesh chunks. They hover in various stages of deterioration and extinction, entering into direct dialogue with the dead

pan fish on view elsewhere. Potential relationships between the fish and the train engine are suggested through connecting elements such as the vertebrae, crude oil, and fiber-optic cable strands: ciphers for contact and networked relations that broadly span both temporal and geological terrains. Together, ancient substances and new technologies generate power for the industries that dominate our contemporary landscape. The seeming inexorability of industry's intended and unintended consequences is evident: the overfishing of the seas has brought complex ecosystems to a point of crisis. Decades of unsustainable practices have had a radical impact on human and nonhuman populations, climates, and lands.

The abstracted narratives in Goldberg's sculptures emphasize the material interconnectedness of things and hint at the psychic cost of their damage. The characteristics, age, and allusions of her materials are in line with theorist Jane Bennett's notion of "vibrant matter," which takes into account the totalizing impact of nonliving and living micro- and macro-actants, from bacteria to human psychology, in any given situation.¹ Acknowledging the interrelationship of material conditions with states of mind, Goldberg voices the exhibition's themes and issues through pearlescent Magic 8 Balls she has embedded in the walls, where they resemble faux pearls or dislocated eyes. The fortune-telling device tersely asks questions while offering advice, sparking an internal dialogue that viewers must feed themselves into in order for legibility to be fed back out. Phrases like "you need a body of water," "still choking, try again," or "all sources suggest otherwise" create a loose yet urgent narrative that visitors ponder while navigating the exhibition, startled by the direct address and confused by the ambiguous messages.

Our charged interaction with the materials and substances we encounter in the exhibition resembles the psychological experience of life in a postindustrial era. The transformations within Goldberg's works create a condition of anxiety and helplessness in light of the indefinite. Something needs to be done, but what can we really do? As Bennett discusses, a nuanced understanding of the innumerable forces at play in any given scenario diminishes the role of human agency. We are certainly active participants, but we are informed by so many internal and external dynamics that we cannot be certain where we begin and where we end. This has implications for the repercussions of our own actions, as well as those of processes that we cannot be certain of or that even escape our awareness entirely. These complex and unfathomable aspects of action permeate Goldberg's exhibition, where movement is either suspended, faster than we can see, or older than we can grasp. In the end, human agency lingers though the manipulation of scale: both the train and the fish correspond in size to the human body, acknowledging the instruments of human perception, touch, reach, and action.

1. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).