

VISUAL ART

“Slow Looking”

by Mitch Speed



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By way of a familiar Vancouver circumstance, I arrived at Catriona Jeffries Gallery one early March day, soaked to the marrow. As I understood, the show I was on my way to see was a kind of thesis on the importance of attentiveness to material. I would've been well served to observe its lesson. Having been away from the city a while, I'd forgotten about Gore-Tex.

On the more fortuitous side of things, I'd been reading Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman*, a tour de force study of how craftwork, with its slow pace and absolute emphasis on attentiveness, shapes not just objects but the mind. While Sennett makes the case for patient work as an ethic, “Slow Looking” seemed interested in what happens when that ethic frays, reconstitutes, or is defined by internal dissonance.

A person could trace this subject's prescience to a shift in consciousness or desire specific to our deliriously digital age, combined, maybe, with the single good outcome of the pandemic, which was that many of our life paces, and therefore our abilities to pay attention to life, briefly defied their usual alignment with capitalist production schedules. Whatever the case, this show's major strength was its ability

to preserve a set of active tensions and contrasts, within a theme that might otherwise seem too expected.

Begin with a cheeky take on truth to materials: James Carl's *Ghiaccio (Thassos)*, 2024, is a life-sized replica of an ice cube tray, carved from white marble. It gestures backwards—toward antiquity, to the permanence of stone, to sculpture as chiselled duration. And yet its modern-industrial subject flattens nostalgic attachment. There's wit here, and a certain perverse restraint. Carl's handling of marble makes the act of carving feel both excessive and necessary.

Down the way and around the corner, Jessica Stockholder's *Reclining nude Spending Fractured time*, 2024, is hung at a winking tilt. It's an unruly arrangement: a truck mirror, rubber tips, a galvanized diamond plate, a wisteria branch suspended horizontally and striped with paint. A yellow chain loops downward, while a shadow, painted grey onto the wall, implies theatricality itself taken seriously as something deeply real. Stockholder is a masterful arranger and coater, conducting transformation through combination. If Carl gives us marble in its slowest possible state, Stockholder gives us a time that's split and jangling.

This play between registers—between things that ask to be seen as craft and things that ask to be seen as collage, between density and surface—is one of the show's most productive patterns. For their part, readymade forms become wearily glamorous. Clémence de La Tour du Pin's *Untitled*, 2022, for instance, comprises broken umbrellas threaded with 22-karat gold. They are poetic, yes—a bit bruised and romantic—but they also carry the fatigue of city life.

A similar attitude underpins Matt Browning's *Plastic Freedom*, 2025, in which PET soda bottles are heat-shrunk, one over the other, until they become small, dense forms—a bit larger than a sandwich, with the sheen of frozen mercury. They're uncanny but somehow also completely ordinary. You could call Browning a kitchen-table alchemist, in whose hands gesture becomes repetition, and repetition a kind of weight greater than the sum of its grams.

When the show veered toward the pictorial, it did so with charming, bulky, awkward force. Liz Larner's *Liken*, 2020, consists of glazed ceramic forms—three in total—jutting from the wall. The edges are rough. The colour is patchy and sponge-like: seafoam green, cloudy white, rust. You know, of course, that these are newly hewn things. But a part of you also wants to see, or thinks it sees, a relic pulled from the deep—or, true to the work's title, from out of a forest floor. In a classic modernist move, which hasn't yet run out of mileage, their mounting structures—a couple of perpendicular ceramic arms—partake in the sculptural drama.

In the main gallery, four anthropomorphic figures—three by Ellen Neel and one other by Liz Magor—oppose and commune with one

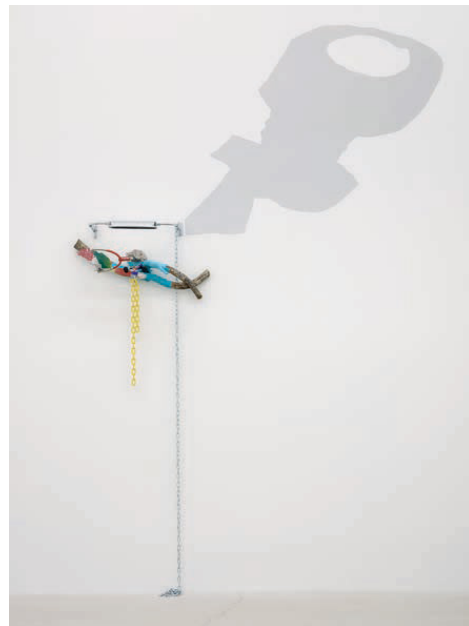
another. With their deep-set eyes and solemn mouths, Neel's carved masks of the mythological Kwakwaka'wakw figure *Tsonokwa* (*Dzunukwa*), 1950, appear animate even at rest. Magor's *Perennial*, 2021, by contrast, is defined by a very present human absence. A peacoat, draped and adorned with synthetic hair, silver edging around moth holes and pockets stuffed with offhanded life debris, carries its wearer's ghost. If Neel's work invokes myth and lineage, Magor's deals in the undernoticed artifacts of personhood.

This was not an exhibition given to unification. It succeeded by allowing that dissonances give dimension and character to a tightly defined theme, and also because it doesn't moralize about attentiveness or patience.

Some works pulled the mind's eye elsewhere. Devon Knowles's *Grains of Sand*, 2024, resembled a giant rope necklace, its lower curve anchored by thick, tubular beads in dusty stripes. Nearby, Christina Mackie's tiny *Green Figure*, 2006, lay face-up on a scatter of seashells, beads and green onyx. Its modelling clay body was moulded with a child's care, oddly charming. Like a funeral scene. Like a half-formed rite for a not-yet-experienced world. ■

"Slow Looking" was exhibited at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, from February 15, 2025, to April 5, 2025.

Mitch Speed is a Berlin-based writer, whose criticism has appeared in Frieze, Camera Austria, Momus, Artforum, ArtReview, Mousse and Spike, among other publications. In 2019 his study of Mark Leckey's video artwork Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore, 1999, was published



by Afterall Books, as part of their *One Work* series. His recent essay collection, *Closeness Eats Time*, was published in 2025 by Brick Press. His forthcoming book is from Floating Opera Press.

1. Jessica Stockholder, *Reclining nude Spending Fractured time*, 2024, truck mirror, bathroom mirror hardware, wisteria tree branch, chain, hardware, galvanized diamond plate, wire, acrylic and oil paint, fabric, rubber furniture tips, 340 × 218 × 33 centimetres. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.