

Herald St

2020 has become a meme. It has gone viral. We use it as an adjective, a state of being, our present condition merely a symptom of a cursed year that both drags on and flashes by in a befuddled haze. When we resist the urge to blame 2020 for causing these paralysing crises of health, racism, politics and ecology, it becomes clear that this year is a symptom of our essential human vulnerability. We mask and wrap and clad and enclose ourselves for protection, for shelter, for speed – but, underneath, our bodies are vessels that at once carry and receive.

Alexandra Bircken has examined our bodily porosity through clothing and sculpture for several years. Her solo exhibition last year at Vienna's Secession was titled *Unruhe*, which can translate to restlessness—disquiet—unease—agitation, and assembled a cast of objects that had been cut, dissected, and splayed out. Her sculptures are often human-like – skins of tights, deflated latex bodysuits, mannequins – yet amputated, warped, out of joint. The sense of *Unruhe* here at Herald St is heightened: like much pandemic art viewing, one cannot help but read works within this context. *Lop Lop*, a motorbike whose wheels have been replaced by rocking skids, moves gently, perpetually, back and forth, yet goes nowhere; its aerodynamic body designed for extreme speed rendered pointless.

Nearby, Bircken has dislocated the frame of a pushbike from its wheels, handlebars and machinery. Distended and abstracted, it becomes a sort of hieroglyphic wall drawing. Unhinged, it begins to look almost skeletal, brachial, spatchcocked. Similarly, a cross-section of a car engine camshaft resembles a spine, its individual cams imitating ladder-like vertebrae. We build our vehicles as extensions of ourselves: a camshaft consists of teeth and lobes that operate valves within the engine body. The artist has titled this *Taktstock*, literally meaning rhythm-stick – more specifically, a conductor's baton; it is an object that performs an almost percussive act, chugging as it rotates. Bircken has interrupted movement, and turned function to dysfunction.

In a new figural work, *The Doctor*, a padded surgical gown sharply contrasts with a prosthetic Christmas tree leg. For the artist, these trees are gifts offered up around the city each January. Their branches' readymade patterns are a visual gift to a sculptor, but also their captured carbon is an offering to us all. Atop *The Doctor's* neck, Bircken spliced and mounted a wooden boat as a curved, beak-like head that conjures images of 17th-century plague doctors. The smiley-face pattern from Berlin's Vivantes Hospital extends from neck to fingertip to toe – skin and cloth have become one.

Bircken plays with the material of our protective forms, either exaggerating our desire for solidity and stability to the point where an object becomes unusable – like a pair of hockey gloves cast in bronze – or betraying its fundamental fragility, like a helmet stitched loosely of thread. With fibrous veins and arteries, it becomes almost unrecognisable as a helmet, revealing the cranial form it is supposed to protect. An image also produced in thread of the new president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, contrasts the weight of power with the increasing frailty of the European project. Bircken focuses on von der Leyen's hands at the moment of her election in 2019 – an image widely reproduced at the time in German media – clasped to her chest in a gesture of humility and gratitude. The Virgin Mary is often depicted with crossed hands over the heart, evoking divine exaltation. Gestures and body language can be a form of protection in themselves. Von der Leyen's modesty at a moment of career mobility somewhat masks her powerful family lineage of wealthy politicians and slave-owning cotton merchants in South Carolina.

Our inability to fully recognise our own bodies is reflected back to us in a mirror, making a shrouded image of our selves. A printed image of knitted textiles overlaid on the polished steel takes on a sort of violent tension when hung. The mirror's title, *T(Raum)*, is a pun on the proximity of the German words *Raum* (room) and *Traum* (dream), playing with our sense of reality, our *Unruhe*.

The thesaurus gives 'naked' as a synonym for 'vulnerable'. It also gives 'stability' as a substitute for 'protection'. Amidst the instability of 2020, how do we protect ourselves? Like Bircken's forms, our attempts to transcend our own fragility become slightly absurd. Skin is porous; vehicles break down; fabric falls apart at the seams and sutures. Yet a suture by definition is not only a division, but a joining-together, a stitching, a union, stabilising that which seems frail in order to protect. Our porosity, our vulnerability, can also be our strength, a symptom of our human impulse to cloak, to shelter, to care.

Text by Phoebe Cripps