

Alexandra Bircken

Gebrochenes Pferd

19th September — 2nd November

Herald St | 2 Herald St, London, E2 6JT
Maureen Paley | 60 Three Colts Lane, London, E2 6GQ

Herald St and Maureen Paley are delighted to announce *Gebrochenes Pferd*, an exhibition of new works by Alexandra Bircken taking place in both galleries' East London premises. Comprising sculpture, wall installation, and photography, this body of work continues Bircken's clinical dissections of cars and motorcycles to reveal our visceral connections to the machines which empower us. Through weaving and chromed surfaces, she expands her focus from that of the singular body to the enmeshed systems which simultaneously protect and stifle the individual.

German for 'broken horse', the title of the exhibition announces a rupture and a feeling of unease. The same name is given to two works which echo one another in separate spaces. At Maureen Paley, we are confronted by a rocking horse in turned wood, its abdomen sliced down the middle and splayed open. Its counterpart at Herald St is a V10 combustion engine removed from an Audi RS 6 and cut into six clean tranches. The horse has long been a symbol of mobility, unbridled speed, and technological prowess even after it was replaced by fossil-fuel powered machines, as exemplified by Ferrari's Cavallino Rampante logo. The V10 represents a pinnacle in the era of combustion engines, embodying an excess of engineering, obsession with size, and hedonistic recklessness. In this pair of sculptures, both are rendered destructive and dysfunctional, the thrill of speed and fanatical optimism of progress cut dead and brought to a standstill. Yet there remains a chance of resurrection, resting on the hinge holding the two halves of the wooden horse apart.

Bircken has long held a rooted interest in fabrics and coverings which act as a second skin, a boundary between our inner and outer selves. In this exhibition, she exposes the networks inherent to threaded and woven materials. Each gallery features wall pieces made from the cable harness of a car, a rope-like construction which, when unravelled and laid out, extends for several meters. Like the nervous system of a body, this mechanism uses electric currents to carry vital information throughout an automobile, with each wire playing an individual role to power a greater whole. At Herald St, harnesses are arranged along a warp and weft and transformed into thick cloths based on rigid grids, ordering the cables into new organisations. Grids and checkerboards are also found in two pieces with wool and nylon frameworks, one in each location. At Maureen Paley, a female figure emerges from a black-and-white knit, blending into the stinging precision of the pattern and falling softly, held by her strict underlying structure. Through weaving, knotting, and braiding, the artist uses textiles as a metaphor for cultural achievement, social systems, and societal regulations, which at once capacitate and engage us inescapably.

Bircken employs repetition and mirroring throughout the exhibition, with sets of works reflecting each other across the two galleries, including a stainless-steel bicycle seat at Maureen Paley and a severed motorcycle at Herald St with a windshield and mudguard in a similar chromed finish. As the surrounding environments inscribe onto their glossy, impenetrable surfaces, the impressions become distorted and the objects lose their inherent logic, becoming difficult to grasp and creating a fetishistic and fascinating allure. The wallpaper lining the walls of both spaces reproduces the signature of Christine Lagarde, the current president of the European Central Bank, as it appears on each Euro banknote. It is here reduced to a graphic representation of a single act and arranged in a grid, transformed into a repeating, ornamental pattern. Looking to the heightened, sensitive moment we live in, Bircken dismantles the currencies and vehicles which enable and empower us, laying bare their anatomies. She displays parallels in the organic and the mechanic, revealing a landscape in a butcher's cutting board or intestinal twists in a steel manifold. By rearranging their components, she exposes our dependence on the machines and networks which offer us exuberance and endless possibilities as much as they hold us bound and imprisoned to them.

Text by Émilie Streiff

Herald St

Front space

Alter Ego

2024

Motorcycle with chrome optics coating
150 x 91 x 127 cm / 59.1 x 35.8 x 50 in
HS20-AB8758S

Lagarde

2024

Printed wallpaper
Dimensions variable
HS20-AB8754F

Back space

(Clockwise)

Heavy Metal

2024

Archival pigment print on paper
110.5 x 185 x 6 cm / 43.5 x 72.8 x 2.4 in
Unique
HS20-AB8762F

Seascape

2024

Butcher's cutting board
39.5 x 99.4 x 8 cm / 15.6 x 39.1 x 3.1 in
HS20-AB8756S

Autobiography

2024

Cable harness, cotton, steel letters
77 x 134 x 6 cm / 30.3 x 52.8 x 2.4 in
HS20-AB8761S

Gebrochenes Pferd (Broken Horse)

2023

Car engine
123 x 179 x 73 cm / 48.4 x 70.5 x 28.7 in
HS20-AB8759S

Automatic

2024

Cable harness, cotton, steel letters
77 x 167 x 6.5 cm / 30.3 x 65.7 x 2.6 in
HS20-AB8757S

Alexandra Bircken lives and works in Berlin. In 2025, Bircken will have a solo exhibition at Kunsthaus Biel Centre d'art Bienne, which will travel to Culturgest in Lisbon. Previous solo shows include: *La pensée corps*, Fondation Pernod Ricard, Paris (2022); *A-Z*, Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2021), which travelled to CRAC Occitanie, Sète (2022); *Fair Game*, KINDL Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2021); 2020, Herald St, London (2020); *Top Down / Bottom Up*, Fridericianum, Kassel (2020); *Unruhe*, Secession, Vienna (2019); and *Mammal*, Studio Voltaire, London (2018). She participated in *May You Live In Interesting Times*, La Biennale di Venezia, Venice (2019). Bircken's work is held in the institutional collections of FRAC Lorraine, Metz; Museum Brandhorst, Munich; Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg; Sprengel Museum, Hannover; The Hunterian Museum, Glasgow; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.