Jack O'Brien
Testimonies

Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

In this exhibition, Jack O'Brien returns to a recurring tension in his practice, where acts of contortion become inseparable from the structures that hold his work together. The first time I saw a set of his sculptures in person was a few years ago, in a group show in London. They were wall-based works consisting of twisted white dress shirts suspended on armatures made from found objects. Protruding from the walls with an almost invasive aggression, they simultaneously bore a sense of stability, as the fabric functioned as a support system, not only subject to contortion. They formed a set of three, each distinguished by variations that initially appeared slight but revealed careful deliberation on closer inspection.

A similar attentiveness to difference runs through the three works that constitute O'Brien's current exhibition in Cologne. Here, traces of use become points of departure for arrangements of cymbals and replica armour. O'Brien's repeated forms establish a kind of syntax; components of the work can be read as punctuation marks, capable of introducing pauses and connections into an otherwise disparate assembly. Repetition makes small departures consequential, as each arrangement proposes a subtly different way of controlling a limited set of elements. Their near-symmetries suggest an order, which is complicated by individual folds and gestures.

Here the material palette is reduced to cut, folded and bent cymbals, some cracked through sustained use. The cymbal is a placeholder or gestural marker, with the armour providing a foundational scaffold. While O'Brien's sculptures have frequently drawn on the material of late capitalism – domestic furniture, industrially produced elements and discarded objects sourced from the particular urban environments in which he works – the inclusion of Grecian-style armour plating speaks to an earlier history. These masculine surfaces make protection inseparable from the conspicuous display of power. Yet its symbolic authority is displaced, as the armour is largely concealed. This exchanges the display of rank for the less conspicuous authority of support: a form associated with the protection and distinction of a privileged body now holds other objects in place. The buried structure could suggest that older signifiers of privilege have not been discarded so much as built into the material arrangements of the present.

Subtle openings in the sculptures suggest access and the possibility of a gaze being returned. With armour, this uncertainty is especially charged through a reading continuous with the queer potential of O'Brien's earlier work, where the binding or displacement of familiar objects opens their prescribed uses to other desires. The body enters through these relations of exposure and concealment, even where no figure is represented. The reduced vocabulary brings the individual intervention into focus. In essence, a cut or fold can alter an object's bearing without erasing its form. The golden surfaces gather into nearly heraldic configurations, with the cymbals' concentric grooves still visible across their planes. Slender rods cross or extend beyond these compact forms, while small openings interrupt their apparent solidity.

To some extent, the passage from shirts to armour extends O'Brien's concern with how the body is presented. These new sculptures offer another version of a body made public, their protective contours also staging an image of strength. That image is subject to rearrangement as cymbals bring a different history of contact: an instrument made to receive repeated blows has retained the effects of being played. The artist's gestures meet marks that precede them, so that the distinction between damage and the production of form becomes difficult to discern. The bronze welding rods are a means to dissolve and unravel the objects. A material ordinarily used to join parts is given a role in their dissolution.

Testimonies might be understood through this persistence of touch and contact. A worn or cracked cymbal bears evidence of use, but cannot give a complete account of the gestures that produced it. Transforming it into a sculpture adds further actions to that incomplete record. What these works offer as testimony is partial and material: enough to make an encounter felt, without making its history fully available.

— Tomass Aleksandrs