

Caroline Achaintre

ARCADE



Caroline Achaintre, *Shell Flush*, 2016, ceramic, patent leather, 35 1/2 × 13 × 7".

Suddenly, Caroline Achaintre's work seems to be everywhere. A stand-out in the current British Art Show, with a recent solo display at Tate Britain, Achaintre is now preparing for a major presentation opening in July at the warehouse-size BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, in Gateshead, UK. The French-German sculptor has lived in London since the late 1990s; her gradual ubiquity might have gone temporarily undetected owing to her staggering variety of artmaking techniques. The sensational, colorful, hairy wall rugs that emerged just over a decade ago suggested a signature style, but there were also small, perfectly formed, abstract ink-and-watercolor drawings (they feel distinctly painterly, although Achaintre is not a painter) and—as in this show, "Limbo"—exquisite ceramic or thinly stuffed fabric wall sculptures.

In the two quilted works and five ceramic pieces in "Limbo"—all in manageable, body-scale sizes—Achaintre manipulates flat materials (rolls of clay, cuts of fabric) to produce elaborately textured, wall-based three-dimensional objects. Each was uniquely fascinating, from the shining *Shell Flush* (all works 2016), with its patent-leather shell wrapped around a double-pointed mother-of-pearl ceramic tusk in faux-python finish; to *Lee Vee Double D's* mane-like shape and stiff, ultralong ears, all with dark, leathery surfaces; or *Shack's* pleated, masklike ceramic "face" rendered in a striated, silvery sheen; or *Lemac's* headless, jagged fabric body and its tail like an elephant's. The experience felt less like a gallery visit than a trip to the natural history museum: observing at length each unfamiliar creature, with its varicolored epidermis and curious symmetries. Filled with elements reminiscent of antlers, tortoise shells, or desiccated bones, the show began to feel like an assortment of hunting trophies, and I remembered that Achaintre's earlier furry tapestries resembled zebra skins and bearskin rugs. The artist-as-hunter analogy was eerily reinforced when I learned that Achaintre had created those early tapestries by shooting wool through the rugs' versos with a tufting gun.

Achaintre's ambitious, clay-based studio experiments—with glazes varying from dry, stony matte to wet, shiny gloss—look less like handcrafted sculptures than, perhaps, age-old fossils recently unearthed, or giant mollusks retrieved from the bottom of a lake. Although I'm tempted to link her work's deep shadowy folds to the drapery of classical figures, in fact I am less reminded of the work of an ancient sculptor than a twenty-first-century biochemist growing synthetic meat or human spinal tissue in a lab. Hanging over the gallery door—rather like a prize swordfish mounted over a sailing club's entrance—was the fabulous, iridescent blue-green *Golem*. With its tessellated, reptilian skin voluptuously shaped into waves, and frothy curls along its edges resembling ocean foam, *Golem* suggests the lab-grown scales of some cloned, prehistoric sea monster.

Back in the early '80s, in a world overrun with new mass-produced consumables, Jean Baudrillard defined the simulacrum as a copy behind which there is no original. How shall we name Achaintre's first-generation "organic" things, behind which there is no original life form, no biological parent? As untainted nature grows everyday more scarce, this art lends new urgency to the timeworn cliché about wondrous artists capable of bringing inert sculptural materials mysteriously to life.

—Gilda Williams