

Gilda Williams

Experience me, and tell me what I am: The work of Siobhán Hapaska

Siobhán Hapaska was once asked to list a few of the influences on her work. With some irony regarding the impossible task of pinning down the infinite range of sources in any artist's work, Hapaska nevertheless came up with a spectacularly vivid assortment of things: *rock pools, clean windows, watches, satellites, new insoles, window seats on aeroplanes, uncluttered space, taxi rides, pomegranates, aspirin, latex pillows, horizons, foreign supermarkets, suction, cars, and smell*¹.

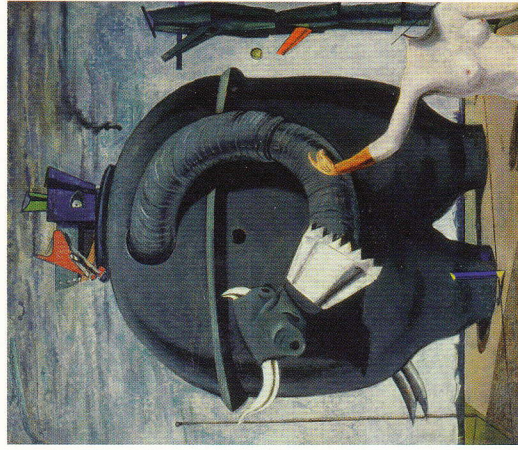
Clean windows? *Suction*? This curious selection is, like Hapaska's art, wildly imaginative, combining the organic with the inorganic, sheer abstraction with the dimly ordinary. I am reminded of the Surrealists' love of dreams, and the beauty they saw in the 'chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table'². The Surrealists' slogan was, obviously, a determined effort to shove things together that didn't belong, to surprise if not to shock, to make us stop short in our habitual thinking, our habitual viewing. One of Surrealism's most celebrated paintings is Max Ernst's *Celebes* (1921) which presents a round, boiler-like machine with a trunk-like hose, tusks or horns; some kind of animal skull and other objects protruding from it; and a headless female nude in the foreground beckoning this mechanized 'elephant' to follow her. I thought of *Celebes* when I saw Hapaska's *Dry Spring* (2007), it too with a strange tube-like protrusion — though more hose-like than trunk. In Hapaska's spring, a flimsy and inept red valve towards the top fails to draw water and wet this bulk of dry upholsterer's stuffing. A brown, vine-like hose wrapped around this 'spring' has nonetheless managed to sprout flowers — as if in defiance of the machine's refusal to produce water.

This life-giving hose however, has also wound its way threateningly around its host like an anaconda, with one slithering vine about to strangle the thing beneath it...

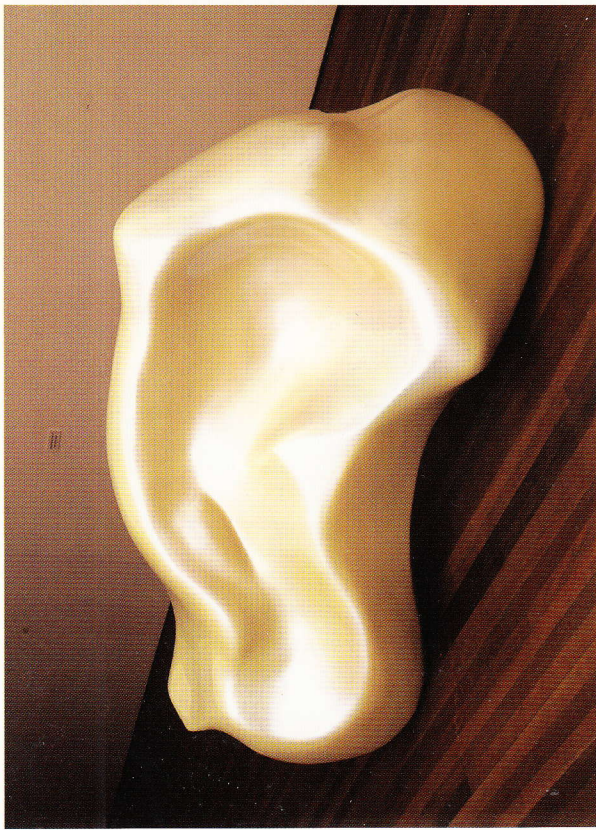
Now Hapaska is no Surrealist; there are by no means 'chance encounters' but carefully staged combinations of form and materials that suggest particular circumstances, conflicts, ideas — for example in *Dry Spring*, the insistence on life even in the face of death. And there is none of Surrealism's connection to revolutionary politics, or psycho-

analysis, or theatre. Nevertheless some 80 years after Ernst's concoction, Hapaska's work does share a few Surrealist-like overlaps: the combination of the mechanical and the organic; of female (the nude for Ernst; the fertile, flowering embrace of the pipe for Hapaska) and male (various phallic protrusions everywhere, from both artists). They both traffic in ugliness alongside seduction. Ernst places the sexy if decapitated woman in front of his monster-machine. Hapaska has her faeces-coloured thing grow adorable pastel flowers, like a craggy old hag tucking a cheap artificial flower behind her ear — the allure considerably offset by the weirdness. *Dry Spring* is a bundle of such contradictions — a spring that provides no water, or a mixture of the season of birth and abundance, Spring, with some unseasonable, catastrophic drought.

At 7'5", *Dry Spring* is considerably taller than a human being. If it came to life it would be a frightening thing: tentacular, formless, and menacing. As Hapaska has said of an earlier sculpture, 'It's an object that will do absolutely nothing, because you shouldn't look at a piece of art and ask "what will this piece of art do to me?" It will do nothing until you do something to it... Experience me, it seems to say, and tell me what I am.'³ Her work never lets viewers off easily but insists that they complete the work with some response, even if they're positively jolted into some reaction. It is important for her 'to try and stimulate people from... an incredible sensory numbness'⁴. To that end she rips into both the conventions of tasteful beauty and the onslaught of ugliness that together anaesthetize daily visual experience. Hapaska's art says, the world is so very full of variety, of possibility, or surprises: Why settle? Why stop?



Max Ernst *Celebes* 1921
Oil on canvas / 125cm X 108 cm
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS London, 2007



Far 1994 / Fibreglass, opalescent paint, two-pack acrylic lacquer / 76 x 244 x 122cm / © the artist

of agate. It pulls behind it, as if harnessed, two shaven tree trunks bearing a raft which carries a miniature version of its former self. Although the original *Far* was, like many of Hapaska's works 'going nowhere fast'⁵, it was a shining, seamless fibreglass vision. *Becoming Cyclonic* is like *Far*'s monstrous twin, responding to current global conditions. It seems to have regressed from its original hyper-tech, fluid form into some primitive, barbaric war machine. Has the tiny, obsolete *Far* been saved? Or trapped? Either way *Becoming Cyclonic* drags behind its dead former self—perhaps its long-lost innocent child self—like a heavy burden.

Shackled and bound, constrained by armour (*amour?*), *Becoming Cyclonic* draws together past hopes (to escape somewhere far) with present fears (an impending storm) as well as the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms. My impression of *Becoming Cyclonic* is of some perverse equestrian sculpture—not the usual knight on a horse but a kind of skinned and defenceless goat wearing patches of armour. Hapaska cultivates an obvious love for surface variation: the beaten metal; the smooth blue agate; the wood; the rope; the fur. Much in her list of alleged influences is very smooth: the wet stones of a rock pool, the latex, the packages in the supermarket, the cars, the pomegranate. Hapaska's work is nothing if not about surface: how varying surfaces can suggest beauty or ugliness; attraction and repulsion; war and peace; love and hate.

- 1 David Barrett, *Vertiges, Printemps de Septembre*, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, 2004.
- 2 Isadore Ducasse, *The Songs of Maldoror, Book Six* (1868–70). Reprinted in Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism*, (London: Phaidon Press), 2004, p. 193.
- 3 The artist quoted in Jennifer Higgie, *Out There, frieze*, Nov/Dec 1997, p. 59.
- 4 The artist quoted in Suzanne Cotter, *Shooting the Breeze. Interview with Siobhán Hapaska*, 0044–Irish Artists in Britain, Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork, Ireland, 1999.
- 5 As described by the artist in an e-mail to the author, September 2007.

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In fact her work spins off endlessly, like the knotted leather unravelling off *Looped Linear Thinking Pac Thing* (2006). Here the title gives us a clue: its wild, looping, crazy tangle extends uncontrollably like a mad, compulsive train of thought. It rests on two sort of sleighs, each infuriatingly facing a different direction, like a pair of perfectly matched lovers no longer on speaking terms. *Lung* (2007) is a pillar-like sculpture that potentially extends ad infinitum, like Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1918). Again contradictory forms are brought together—a natural form, loofah, sliced open and splayed to reveal the cellular growth within, and high-tech looking tracks painted a distinctly artificial-looking, fluorescent orange, looking like streaming racing stripes rocketing upwards. The organic and the inorganic are brought together in this one, with suggestions of high-speed travel hurling into space alongside a natural form rooted to the earth. Like many of her works *Lung* suggests 'Go', but actually says 'Stay. Stay forever'.

In this exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, Hapaska's first solo show in London since her acclaimed 1995 exhibition at the ICA, the artist reworks an earlier sculpture titled *Far* (1995), as if to bring it up to date in our changed, post 9/11 world. *Becoming Cyclonic* (2007), with its title borrowed from weather reportage, sees the boulder-like shape of *Far* covered in (punctured) goatskin. This now-animal-like form is partially protected with occasional bits of armour decorated with circular slices



Speaker 2006 / Fibreglass, wood, steel, slate powder, acrylic paint, cotton / 208.5 X 73.75 X 66cm / © the artist

‘If I’m free, it’s because
I’m always running.’
— Jimi Hendrix

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Mixed media / © the artist

Siobhán Hapaska

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