

frieze^{d/e} blog



Nina Beier, *Cash for Gold*, exhibition view, Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2015 (photograph: Fred Dott)

Danish artist Nina Beier's first institutional exhibition in Germany, *Cash for Gold*, is framed by a specific exchange: the turning of one's possessions, such as unwanted jewelry, into fast money. If you've ever had to pawn something, you know firsthand the lopsidedness of such deals. Moreover, you understand the degrees of loss that are implicit in the exchange; you never get a fair price. Installed in the Kunstverein's upstairs gallery, the exhibition comprises several bodies of work spanning the last two years, during which Beier engaged in a sustained inquiry into the slips in status between image, object and representation. Absences and losses figure prominently in the show, as is the case with *Ground* (2015), a series of bronze bases from which equestrian sculptures have been removed. Yet, in a majority of the works on view, the specific antagonisms of loss and gain are glossed over in favor of gestures that set material wealth against the semiotics of value-production.

In *Greens*, a series of works from 2013, palm saplings are pressed under glass and displayed on beach towels depicting British pounds, Euros and US Dollars. Evoking leisure economies, colonization as well as pre-capitalist systems of exchange, these works also flaunt the symbolic as a core driver of capitalism. Shown on the floor alongside them, works from *Minutes* (2013–15) – a series where human hair wigs are pressed into hand-woven Wagireh carpets – hint at issues troubling labour and trade, just as cheaply as they pun on the word ‘rug’ (also a pejorative term for toupée or wig).



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A related strategy can be glimpsed in *Plunge* (2014–15), a series of sculptures in which oversized stemware contain everyday commodities encased in resin. Here, Beier appropriates the generic visual strategies of stock photography to put together slick and sometimes absurd assemblages. In one, a stream of coins spills from an overturned drinking horn; in another, pairs of scissors are caught in the act of cutting-up a credit card. Elsewhere, objects such as sausage, neckties, vials of nail polish, pharmaceutical accessories, and even a water faucet allude to notions of liquidity and the everyday schizophrenia of consumption society. Configured by a type of image-making in which signs are combined and recombined in order to achieve maximum ambiguity, the sculptures themselves become signifiers for a lack (or, perhaps an over-abundance) of signifieds.

Hermeneutic exhaustion seems to be the point here. Because although Beier's works communicate excessively on a surface level, they also – looking to modernist tradition – strive to evacuate their linguistic content. It's a strategy more or less literalized in China (2015), in which bite-sized sections are removed from porcelain sculptures of dogs and hand-painted ornamental vases. While the objects' meanings are determined by their inscription within systems of exchange and circulation, the narratives surrounding their production, and the contexts in which they circulate (in short, their social lives), in the end they are shown to be empty and hollow forms.



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On a somewhat different register, if Beier's work can be thought to test the art object's capacity to exceed interpretation and valuation by human subjects, then the works on view here rely too much on the logic that they, on the surface, resist. Moreover, in the absence of alternative forms of exchange and circulation that might put her sculptures' agencies to the test, the works are actually reduced to their signifying functions. Or as Jean Baudrillard might have put it, they are 'frittered into "show"'. In them, the production of value becomes a self-valorizing activity. Indeed, Beier's sculptures overflow with the disembodied logic of a semiotized society cashing in on the sheen of its most recent gilded age.