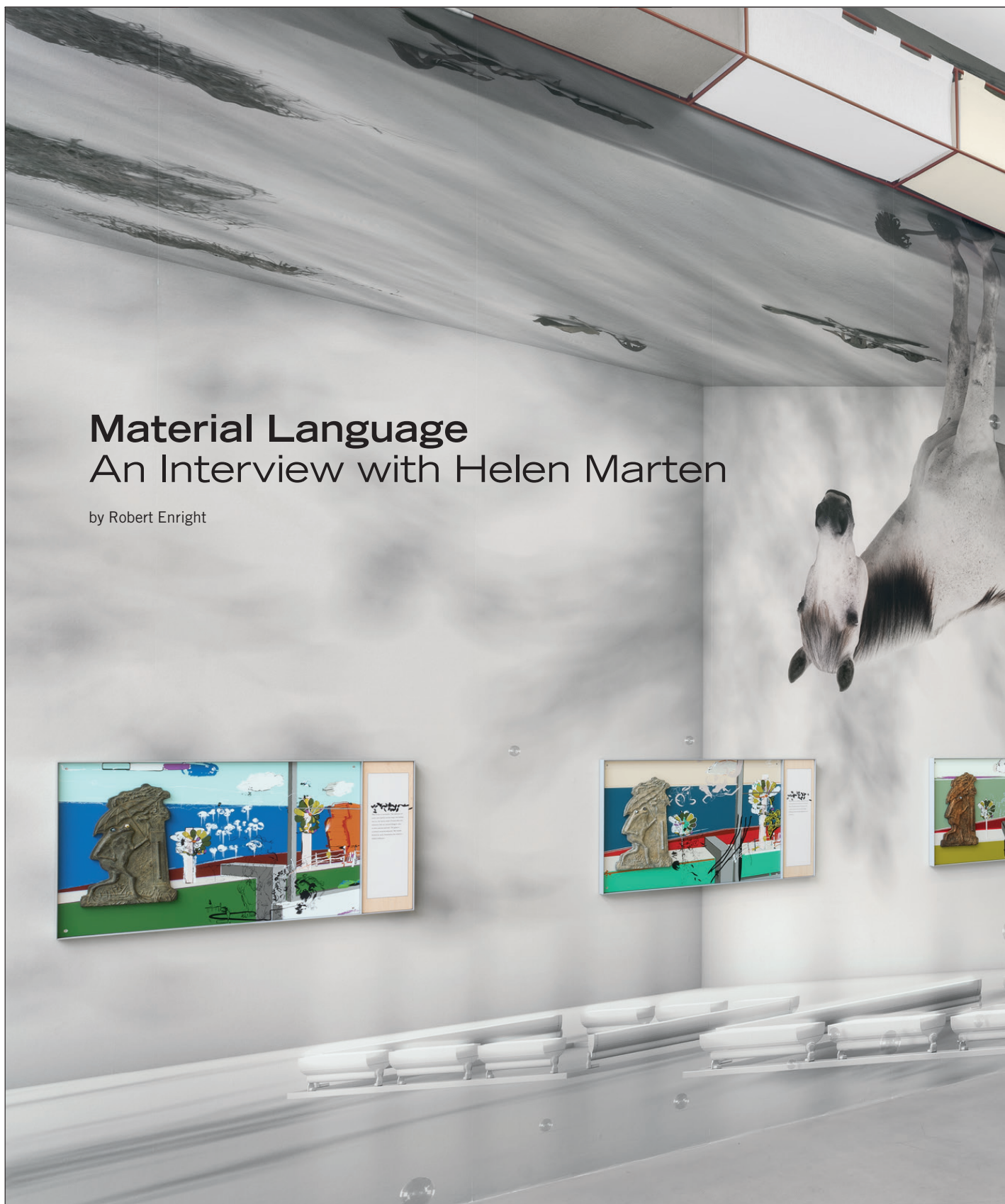


Material Language An Interview with Helen Marten

by Robert Enright





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Helen Marten, the British artist and novelist, opens her response to a series of online questions I sent her by speculating that “words come with the great wailing power of wounding or seducing.” When an artist’s opening gambit is that suggestive—she elsewhere refers to “the incendiary ignition of language”—you know the exchange is going to generate some degree of heat and light. That quality of engaged versatility is apparent throughout her answers, and it frames a compelling paradox. She operates “in-between the danger of carnage and the miracle of beauty”; she recognizes the closeness between “the unapologetic intent of a caress and the wild focused determination of a psychopath”; she is conducting “a relentless dialogue between unbelievably exuberant pleasure and wild, wild fear”; she is aware that “Third Moment Profile | The Almost Horse (A) – (Z),” an alphabetic narrative exhibited at Sadie Coles HQ in 2022, “offers the hope of re-emergence and there is the compulsive idea of the apocalypse every day”; and she appreciates that she is deploying “a certain dualism that might in alternative contexts border on categorical unbalance.”

What is so challenging about Marten’s work is that looking at it involves a series of postponements, or deferrals of conclusive meaning. It is not because there is too little to go on (she is a maximalist and her material range is omnivorous) but because there is too much to see and think about. “Evidence of Theatre,” her recent exhibition at Greene Naftali in New York, includes a sculpture called *Dust of Equivalent Squares*, which includes a number of game boards, two of which are of uneven dimensions, with faux chess pieces that look like plumbing parts; some objects with squares, including a grey and yellow globe on top of a piece of rebar; and two jars of Bonne Maman honey with characteristic blue and white checkerboard lids (one of these has leaked and left a pool of congealed honey on a cantilevered white tabletop). This brief description is a haiku to the long poem of the piece.

My inclination in dealing with this sculpture, and every other one in the exhibition, is to attempt to understand the relationships between and among the component parts. In this regard, I am following the artist’s lead. She has said she is “a deeply methodical person” who “works at the ideas within things quite obsessively,” and I believe her. What could be read as shambolic in the organization of her sculptures is in fact the result of careful consideration. Because there is so much to consider, you instinctively feel you are in rich territory, where you adhere to the rallying epigraph from EM Forster’s novel *Howards End*, published in 1910, imploring us to “only connect.” Making connections in the multivalent visual world

(“whirled” is a more accurate word) of Helen Marten would seem to be both desirable and inescapable. The passage in the novel goes on to say, “Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, . . . Live in fragments no longer.” Marten’s version of the book, call it *Marten’s End*, would add to the fragmentary caution the contradictory directive to “only live in fragments.”

The latter condition is where I find myself. But I want to be clear about this. My state of puzzlement never moves to bewilderment. I am using the word in its root sense, to be made wild. Something quite different and opposite happens. I am made neither wild nor frustrated in this process; I am engaged and delightfully so. Looking at Marten’s work, her



installations especially, is a pleasurable challenge. There are numerous times when you think you see in it visual echoes of work by other artists: a floor plan will look like Francis Picabia; the logic of her object combinations recalls Kai Althoff; certain compositions have the improbable intelligence of Robert Rauschenberg; at other times the febrile mechanics of László Moholy-Nagy emerge; an acrobat out of Pablo Picasso makes a cameo appearance; and frequently sections of her wall pieces suggest Marcel Duchamp’s *The Large Glass*. But in this case the bride strips bare the bachelors. As soon as the connection is made, the sculpture shifts your attention elsewhere. As Marten says in the artist’s book for “Evidence of Theatre,” “From here onward, matter becomes spongy and porous: information leaks in all directions.” Your visual echoes end up being smokescreens, insinuations, diversions, even decoys. Their equivalents in language are rumours and whispers.

Throughout the following exchange Marten returns to formations of language and ideas that take us

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Helen Marten, installation view, “Third Moment Profile | The Almost Horse,” 2022, Sadie Coles HQ, London. All images courtesy the artist, Sadie Coles HQ and Greene Naftali. All photos: Eva Herzog.

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1. *The Almost Horse (Z)*, 2022, cellulose paint on aluminum, epoxy resin on maple, aluminum, cast chemically patinated bronze, lamp work glass, 101.3 × 58.3 × 3.8 centimetres.

2. “Third Moment Profile | The Almost Horse” (installation detail), 2022, welded steel, stitched fabric, wire cable, reinforcement couplers, approximately 2529.1 × 1187.5 × 551.6 centimetres.

in two (or more) directions at once. It is important to recognize that hers is not a decision to be deliberately veiled or obscure but is the operation of a “kind of continual semantic shifting,” where ambiguity and metaphor are in constant circulation. Their interaction creates “the permission for a this or that understanding of meaning,” and it represents “a beautiful and intensely powerful way to continue probing at meaning.” Elsewhere she describes this probing as “how our individual minds choose to glue information together.” That glue fastens and fashions a generous and rigorously exhilarating epistemology.

In 2016 Helen Marten won both the Hepworth Prize for Sculpture and the Turner Prize. Her first novel, *The Boiled in Between*, was published in 2020, and she is currently completing a second novel called *A Polite History of Vandalism*. She is represented by Greene Naftali in New York and Sadie Coles HQ in London.

through—a means of arriving as an already loaded cultural human with new possibilities. In the sense of capital purchase, speech doesn’t cost a thing, yet its capacity for generating wide worlds of aggregate material quality, of interpretation, politics, honesty, metaphor and feeling, is vast and gymnastic. Of course, I’m not naïvely imagining that free speech has no price, but written text permits a structural space of conceptual organization to emerge, and within that diagrammed space of information or suggestion, there is subtext, translation, escalation, collage. The permission for a this or that understanding of meaning is not, for me, ambiguous or unedited or undecided but rather a beautiful and intensely powerful way to continue probing at meaning because it is never dead: it is active and ever magic, ever possible. This is not hubris but optimism. But also, in a very humbled, nerdy way, I can’t think of many things more gorgeous and generous than



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BORDER CROSSINGS: Let’s start where you start: Why is language the generative thing for you?

HELEN MARTEN: Well, I suppose words come with the great wailing power of wounding or seducing. They can arrive with enormous speed, tumbling en masse, but they act equally like nets or fences, harnessing particles of meaning into place. We learn words as children in a certain objective, collectable way, like they are small portions of becoming familiar with the world that we can carry carefully in our pockets and bring out as pictorial cards with underwritten image significance when the option of dialogue or pronouncement or emotion presents itself. To have the versatility of language is to become paradoxically both light and enormously heavy as an operator of ideas. There is nothing more special than the privilege of thinking and rearrangement, but the more you know, the more you truly don’t and vice versa. Language ignites in the most incendiary ways, for good and for bad. I think that unmooring is particularly special, because it suggests a new way

words—a story, a verse, a scrap of theory that blows your mind into new shudders of excitement. How cosmic, how hopeful.

My phrasing about language being a thing wasn’t accidental. Are words objects for you?

I think that is picking at a deeply conceptual set of knots. I dream incredibly viscerally, literally violently. Sometimes it is terrifying and I emerge distressed and dissolved into a wholly undiscernible place. And I often dream in other languages, or the few that are buried in me at a more tertiary level than domestic everyday access, such that what I am left with on waking is a density of images and a material quality of objects or landscapes that have become untethered from familiarity. My material memory from childhood, even now through adulthood, is so deeply felt, and those resonances of skins or granular surface qualities sting for me the same way words do. I had once imagined words as having shadows in a literal obdurate sense of stuff, because they

can be mobilized or stratified like geology. You know, they land, they thump, they scorch, they weep along. These are words as monolithic poetics but also rubble, madly scattered and begging to be picked up, tossed, rearranged. My favourite idea with regard to that is Gilles Deleuze's concept of language as "an egg on the road"—pregnant, volatile, portentous of life but equally vulnerable to the threat of breakage and spill. Imagine the smoke of a cigarette spiralling out of a big warm body, touching cold air in dense blooms of exhalation, which then narrow out to cursive script. To lay a word out onto space just beyond the lips. How beautiful! That algorithm of hot breath and hot, dark poison contained thickly together holds the sense of language really having a shadow in all dimensions—particles of breath that implicitly belong to souls with minds, with bodies and speech, all of it combined for an instant to be hung out with fractional but serious density, then swept up again to mingle with other atoms, with other space, with other plural cavities of living agency. That is just one tiny idea of the somatic fictions that can be stirred up.

When you say that "I'm absolutely thinking about language in every move," my inclination is to apply it to the way that you construct an installation. Maybe your installations are material essays. Or better yet, maybe they are fictions. Do either of those categories make sense to you?

When I make an exhibition, that exhibition aim, for me, is an attempt towards a total expression of an enclosing concept but, naturally, also many smaller units of that idea, connected and reparsed within, and so on and so on. I think the idea of "language every move" is that deliberate verb quality of language: to literally activate substance and capitalize on its inherently attached baggage of meaning, to structure the visibility of that meaning, and thus endeavour for all gestures within a work to contain intent. It's not lethargy or poetics for the sake of itself. It's an active, kinetic stance that hopes not just to receive but also exude and reposition. Of course, as with many generalizing lines, a single peripheral gesture can also behave independently and intuition sometimes take over. This is important. Part of the profound pleasure of making an exhibition is not to invent entirely new fictions but to find deep intent in what is before us. I'm not really interested in fantasy or the route of the imaginary but rather in taking the profound complications—our devotion, our skepticism—for the real world, and finding modes of deploying intellectual string—tying parts together, binding, looping or knotting over and over again. There are so many puzzles in that, so many patterns and rhymes. Just as the craftsperson translates shadow designs, so too do artists find the points of fractional overlap between things and build entirely new meaning from parts that paradoxically don't truly exist with any previous legacy. There is a magical plastic unity—the unity of the whole and the part, and the part separate from the whole. And then on top of that, there are the logistical concerns, the architecture, the light, gravity. The general dimensions of the whole head, the distance apart of the eyes, the covering of hair—these might all be considered qualities that affect peripheral vision. So too one can take into consideration the location and delivery speed of meaning, how it is quite literally materialized into the realistic unity of a whole image and thus all the connoting and denoting

information it carries alongside. Making art might be something like poking evolution and its infinite spirals of reinvention and distribution.

There is something about your understanding of the way that image and language work that is both liberating and slightly terrifying. As you say, simplicity doesn't exist. Is the nature of being alive, then, to be caught in a condition of inescapable complexity?

Complexity, yes absolutely. Imagine the various intersections of voice that stem from positions of social compromise—gender, sexuality, class, race, ability—and imagine further how the realms of fact from these different positions shift via the notion of lived experience. I would say that to imagine poetry and criticism as opposing categories is a certain kind of madness, but in wider social terms, that might often be the case. What is considered empirical fact is often dangerously made concrete by certain positions of power, by finance, by influence, by geography. And so yes, the terror versus freedom complex of language is enormously messy. When it works, what should be electric about artmaking is that the hermeneutics open themselves with deep and gracious optimism—so much lends itself to the nuance of rediscovery. Ambiguity and metaphor are great gifts. They are not a wilful choosing not to be clear but rather a kind of continual semantic stitching, jogging, if you like, because they do not lay laws that suggest only binary options for understanding. How sad it would be not to probe at all angles to make meaning. That is where it lies, after all. Not in the so-called empirical. When our geographies, our politics, our people are dissolving into the terrifyingly possessed world of the digital, is it then not radical to re-engage with matter, not the violence of erasure, but instead language, over and over?

Am I being too binary? Is there some gap, something that comes before complexity, that what we have to negotiate is the nuance of the interstitial, of the things that happen before an engagement with the absolute of complexity?

I'm certain there is a gap. And at our best, most perverse, most provocative, we water those gaps, the cracks, explicitly in the hope that something grows up in-between. This is Rosmarie Waldrop's "gap gardening," the idea that the spaces in-between words, in-between meaning, are where the constellation of those elements becomes amorphous and welcoming of yet more emergence. There are relative dimensions that we understand, and within those there are conditions of practice or spheres of representation—the small words that bind massive concepts. Syntax and grammar are parts of the potion, the dark magic, hell-bent on distortion.

In the alphabet of "Third Moment Profile | The Almost Horse" (2022), for "J" we read that "the horse knows with anticipation that she must taste the other side." The animal's taste allows it to operate inside a binary pasture.

I think the "other" of that sentence is a deliberately queered word—it is a spatial mirage. In setting out a place with described terrain, with adjectival density, with literal buildings and lines of inside and outside, I am, on the one hand, laying down the

1. *Writing A Play (dark blue orchard)*
(detail), 2023, "Evidence of Theatre,"
Greene Naftali Gallery, New York,
steel, aluminum, bird's eye maple, tulip
wood, maple, birch plywood, particle
board, magnets, nylon inks, sand cast
aluminum, cardboard, cast resin, cast
Jesmonite, cast pewter, glazed ceramics,
paper, stitched fabric, LED screens,
CGI animation, sound (27 minutes, 50
seconds), 281 × 520 × 464 centimetres.

2. *Writing A Play (dark blue orchard)*,
2023, steel, aluminum, bird's eye maple,
tulip wood, maple, birch plywood,
particle board, magnets, nylon inks,
sand cast aluminum, cardboard, cast
resin, cast Jesmonite, cast pewter,
glazed ceramics, paper, stitched fabric,
LED screens, CGI animation, sound (27
minutes, 50 seconds), 281 × 520 × 464
centimetres.



classic foundations of a story, but I am also setting up a deliberate dramaturgy, or a world of subterfuge. In the short space of the tale being told, every plausible condition of weather seems to occur. There is hard dusty ground and then the thick fogged coolness of snow—these should be contradictory qualities of material and sound, but they act not in binary but as part of the rhythmic shell of the story, as moving meteorological grammar. The narrative also unfolds with ambiguous but charged relations between two men of clearly different ages, between the animal energy and their male energy, between nature and the human hand that labours to propagate it. There is no hetero-posturing, no atomic certainty, but a mobile fluidity. The horse contains the values of she and female, and she is wildly poignant for the intense throb of this femininity, which is not degraded by its animalism but dignified. It is ancient, sonic, intelligent. The story paces through modes, as you might deliver acts of a play—zones of translation between love and abandonment, fervour and lassitude, sickness and living. These are again conditional terms: first this, then that. Again, that is not a wilful obfuscation of commitment but something more mathematical, more productively philosophical, like Cartesian doubt. The subtext of the comma, of the therefore, is a wonderful conjunctive thing. And in more illustrative terms, if I imagine drawing an aerial plan of the space in which this story takes place, it is a simple geometry of squares and circles that conjoin and touch—the house, the pastures, the pen. These shapes are elemental abstractions of easily imagined ubiquitous spaces that cast influence on each other. Back to the shadow. To the gapped overlap. Perhaps the other side here is part of the semiotic construct of theatre, namely the curtain, how and when it is parted and what happens when it does. I like to imagine within stories something like a meridian line that suggests, on the one side, capture, and, on the other, freedom. You are always held within the pages of a narrative because you must move through it to finish and you must often finish to reconsider or paradoxically to start again. And the story here is of course deployed through the formal logic of an A to Z, each of the 26 paragraphs of the story beginning with the next consecutive letter of the Western alphabet, so yes, it is harnessed by a system of formal control. And that ends. It sounds like I am in the business of setting self-congratulatory traps, but I am committed with deep enthusiasm and respect, never cynicism. And when anything ends, it is often a space of the other—there is the hope of re-emergence and there is the compulsive idea of the apocalypse every day. The world in this story is a ghost, a man, a horse, the apples, the soil, the seasons, the snow, the wind, the love, the pain. Everything wants to die but doesn't know how. Everything wants to live but doesn't know how.

Let me ask you the question your novel asks: "Who is the 'I' writing these pages?" A connected question is this: Is it possible to write in the third person? A further connected question: Is it possible to make anything in the third person? Is there an Objective Sculptor?

Aren't we all something like strange, messy candles? There is the hidden inner homunculus with its eager disposition to inflame, to add judgment and critique—how good it makes us feel, how bad. We get all melty with shame and emotion, our own organic sexuality, our thick physicality getting so hot and soft, dripping

off, then hardening again. The wick, the wax, the flame—perhaps that's a too-neat analogy for different voices, for different qualities of ego and analysis. Flirty knowledge-lovers, bickering romantics, posturing salespeople. We need them all to create, but maybe to enact the third person you need to kill the myth, which I'm not sure you can do without reverting again and again back to the self. A typographic sidebar: the "I" stands up, announces; with the "We," you pitch towards it like a mountain, down and then up again. Or maybe third person is only a euphemism for a set of favours granted to oneself when the idea of "out of body" feels too feudally territorial and hallucinogenic, too abstract.

One of the words you frequently use is "deception." It seems to be both a fact of existence and a strategy of performance. How pervasive and necessary is deception in artmaking?

I feel like I myself am faced with deception at all turns. And I don't at all categorize that word in the negative sense but rather with the glimmer and glitzy allure of a foil, tinsel and colour that rearrange a default expectation. My guess would be that a disproportionate number of makers enjoy deception because it is the small voice, not sinister, that asks, "Well, think again." This is etymology, too, with its own limping bravery.

Is the word free of judgment? Has it any ethical weight?

1, Perhaps never! 2, perhaps always!

Another word that appears frequently in your lexicon is "treacherous," or some variation on that condition. What is the source of its ubiquity? Ethan tells us that "there are layers of betrayal in everything."

There might be something in imagining a weird magnetism that pulls us continually between, say, fear and pleasure, or some other such set of emotional signifiers. In-between the danger of carnage and the miracle of beauty there might be a measure that marks the point at which ourselves begin, amidst the chaos of our strongest feelings. This is a paraphrasing of Audre Lorde. But in short, treachery, and especially that unique power wielded by women to aspire or empower or simply carry, is part of the mystical power of the love and rage that reside innately in us. Treachery is not ultimately deception, or at least I certainly don't employ it as such, but rather the kind of carnal, political, erotic power that knowledge instills in things and then adds to, over and again, myopically, broadly and with such colossal weight that commonplace definition is not possible, or actually even desirable. It is a paradoxical obsession with a destruction of attainment in the most gloriously generative sense.

I want to riff a bit on this idea of how treachery makes meaning. René Magritte's 1929 painting of a pipe has three names, one of which is *The Treachery of Images*. Its treachery is that the gap between image and language renders it unable to make any claim on meaningful representation. The painting offers us pictorial normalcy and cognitive incongruity. You also recognize the precariousness of certainty and the everywhere flush of ambiguity. Magritte's treachery is pictorial; yours is linguistic in that it is about language's deception. Are they the same kind of deception?



Ah yes, it's a bewitching conundrum. I wonder if this returns to the project of what happens to our linguistic centres when we are small and malleable, and what would happen if the default index that was installed from birth was not only more permeable but subject to exercises of deliberate change. A literal shuffling of the cards. The question of whether or not the typology of the treachery is the same is very difficult. Disney, for all its social problematics, is a good example of morphing performativity: a skeleton dances in a symphony with other skeletons, tickling his ribs in the manner of a xylophone; the bones detach in new configurations of jewellery, clothing, simple dead piles. The modesty of the image is striking for its underlying simplicity, but the continually jangling shift of body to instrument, to collective, to orchestra, via death, humour, elegy, is shocking. The vision necessitates the strictest temporal and plastic calculations. There is a kind of divine omnipotence that destroys known qualities, perhaps language, but here it is maybe more a reconstructing of the world to comply with one's own vision, one's own will. It is a vision that renders the viewer powerless in the face of the hero, in this case, the theatrical man and his orchestra. It makes us afraid of other learned qualities—the sun, the moon—what might become of them in this land that underwrites normalcy and produces a constant additional option for change? Perhaps ultimately, another mode: treachery is to think about what happens when we finally kill the planet, and our only fleeting memory of light before we disappear is the wreaking bioluminescence that leaks

from our phones and laptops. What happens when we then go blind from curse or plague or indifference and that light is the brightest of all?

Let me shift “treachery” to another frame of reference, one that is more lyric. The third name of the Magritte painting is *The Wind and the Song*. The question then becomes: Can we make treachery poetic?

Oh wind! I love wind. There is a wonderful book about wind by Lyall Watson, whose subtitle is *A Natural History of the Wind*. It speaks of wind as the nervous system of the planet, how wind destroyed the Spanish Armada, how it fated Odysseus, moved lopsided through wars, propagated the miasma of disease. It speaks of the ill winds of suicide and murder, the sun-baked winds of mountainous paths and joy. I would say wind and song might even be wired to the same rare disappearing quality of modest, unadorned pleasure. So yes, pleasure in treachery and, when that wind changes, vice versa.

If Susan Sontag's declaration was that in place of a hermeneutics of art, we need an erotics of art, somewhere close under the skin of your language is that we need an erotics of material. Think about mushrooms and their wild mycelium networks, their long, stretched-out hyphae that extend down in deep historical nodes, form colonies, span thousands of acres of land, speak, exchange and engage, emit electrical signals of warning or danger,



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convey information, secrete enzymes and biological polymers, sometimes rear up with fruiting bodies we tramp over and assign easy terminology: mushroom. The mushroom is certainly a good example of the erotics of material: it is so possessed. Mythologic! Its skin is magical deformity, a weird spongy, ectoplasmic kind of foam. The mushroom might be both the severed head and the Banquo ghost. Hell, and back. Clouds and their heavens. Lover and necromancer intertwined. The squeak it makes as we chop it, then fry, then squash small chunks between our teeth, dunk them absorbent into sauce. Its flapped gills with their enormous surface area, their productive liquid exchange. There is a terrifying mushroom, the *Rhodotus palmatus* (colloquially, the wrinkled peach mushroom), whose head looks like a renal pathology of kidney nephrons, or tripe, and whose stem is blistered along its length with grotesque pink hanging sacks like pus or watered blood. I see that mushroom and my conjoined instincts are deeply Freudian in their erotic revulsion. I imagine a warm rabbit with its own tight and bristling coat panting along through the forest, happy, hoppy, ground dew-damp, feet thudding lightly, only to come across this mushroom, aghast, ashamed of its own promiscuous curiosity, its desire, its historical maniacal drive for evolution, and, in a moment of unhinged and uncharacteristic animal spontaneity, reaching a steaming little tongue out to touch those sacks, to push its small warm muscle against the gemlike bauble of liquid, feel its pressure, then retract tongue back into mouth before bursting sack eliminates or engorges. Hop on, little rabbit, hop on! If that isn't something close to an ecstasy of material hermeneutics, I don't know what is.

You have remarked that you're certain that "even the most definitive materials are whorish deep down; they are meta-physically flirtatious." Your phrasing is delicate, even polite. I would have thought the word that connects with "whorish" is "promiscuous."

One thing that is rarely discussed with my work might be its commitment to queerness, or, more simply, a rejection of heteronormativity. I personally don't think those are buried qualities—what horror to be heavy-handed—but perhaps it is interesting to note that one inherent mode of the activity of physically making, handmaking, might be the patriarchal tool-history that pours into process. Perhaps Lee Lozano has most succinctly bashed that into new and productive oblivions. I think the idea of "whorish" necessarily connects to the antique but deeply eroticized gaze of minimalism. The tautological feedback loop of a gaze hollowed out and reflected back through a shiny surface, the greasy smudge of red lipstick on a mirrored box. That is so sexy to me. But the promiscuity in that instance is quite objectively one of a male-female dynamic, which I'm not particularly interested in. Play is the thing, and the theoretical terms of play are linked to danger, to vertigo, to simulation, to speed. Human eyes are innately drawn to a soft-lipped edge; they're interested in the kitsch bulb of a curve, a softly balanced colour palette. The whorish part of existing within those imagined terms of attraction might be something like a tactile mathematics, adding a little here or subtracting there to undo balance, to assert an off-kilter phrasing of material that looks, for want of a better word, a little weird, instilled with certain qualities of madness or abstraction. Perhaps

that "madness" is a forced and intense symmetry, a doubling; perhaps it is paint so hermetically refusing that it is death rather than skin; perhaps it is a deliberate metonymic punning of something's particular fold, its grain, its elastic legibility as another shape or form entirely. I think "polite" is perhaps incorrect, but maybe at least "decorum" would not be something I'm poised towards.

You do eroticize the tactile when you say that what you hope to do is to "fuck with the edges of touch ... split open the erotic seams of objects." Because you touch everything that comes out of your studio and goes into an exhibition, the area where you are fully promiscuous is in the tactile?

I mean the making of many things in the world requires the deployment of a certain dualism that might in alternative contexts border on categorical unbalance. Hand in hand, there is both the unapologetic intent of a caress and the wild, focused determination of a psychopath. It is a relentless dialogue between unbelievably exuberant pleasure and wild, wild fear. And in-between those two extremities of feeling, the rules of how to deploy and morph behaviour are changing: you run into accident, error, criticism, cost, doubt, time, judgment. And I guess the feeling in a lot of these works is shared feeling, because I work intensely with many different people, roving across different processes, different backgrounds, different modes of touch, skill, expression, confidence. It's an inherently tactile process that's brokered by a beautiful shared intent to get something done, and the primary impulse of that experience for me is humbling appreciation: a certain constellation of people aligns at the right time and the right place, we talk, manoeuvre, experiment, undo. Then there is the other hand: the actual making process can be so delusional, so extraordinarily removed from a "normal" way of doing something. These abstractions are not erotic per se, but rather the route by which something is brought into the world might not follow normal hierarchical rules. I love the idea of technology becoming heuristic and carrying the distorted emotional impatience of a mind (or several) that leads to an undoing of prediction or certainty. My own personal health and safety in the studio is abysmal, I behave like a maniac, cutting, burning, slopping away. I wear Crocs and sweatshirts. I might suggest to a foundry that we melt something differently, scratch into moulds in a way that perverts the conventional rules for easy production; I add turmeric to a liquid for casting; I pour boiling pewter into handmade plaster containers buried in sand, they steam and tremble—there's inherent witchcraft at work. And because of all that, I bump accidentally into discovery. Perhaps it is a kind of courting. A way of slipping into your desire and not coming up against a wall but moving up it, through it, finding shelter, depth, simply scratching and retreating satisfied, addressing via the wall itself the very thing you are looking for. Imagine another sloppy allegory: you want to kiss someone but you can't, you don't know how or how to ask, so instead, you bite them on the neck, hard. It is a brutal move, promiscuous, but not at all kind. It's regressive, primal. In return you are slapped hard across the face, your nose is caught, making it bleed. The blood drips onto the pavement and it is amber in the streetlight. A nectar of desire ruptured, turned around. The mutual feeling is for the moment, newly shattered, rearranged,



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possibly encouraged or ended forever. This certain lasciviousness might be part of the horror-fantasy realm of identity, both hunger and abjection intertwined. There is a plight of plausible tenderness in scripting a reconciliation, an apology, a bandaging—the barest of human emotions but all so complex. Maybe that could be one way to imagine how to break the instilled grammatical rules of “symbolic” space, to find a way through process.

Is language more seductive, more of a turn-on, than image?

For me, no, luckily! I see things, I read things, and they move me. Sometimes together, sometimes individually. It’s a dance.

You have the elegant phrase and idea of “a coalescence around the distrust of an image.” Fill out the nature of that coalescence for me.

Well, that coalescence is a thickness of baggage-content that has come to the boil via history and has now quite staggeringly collapsed or become amorphous in the face of technology. Our mistrust of digitality, of image poverty, of the speed and decrepitude of mass-market looking has helped promote an economy of imperfection. Even a highly detailed 3D scan of an object or texture, a process that harnesses pore-deep resonant



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information, is ultimately a crass simulation not entirely alive and not entirely dead. I love all ends of this spectrum, how and where they merge. Where skin breaks and you see either all the bristling information or a void. I think that coalescence is something to do with how our individual minds choose to glue information together—we have learned to use our eyes and then to distrust them. That is certainly part of our own unique tolerances for honesty or fantasy, and a default political choice to filter the things we are individually concerned with or attracted to. The human world is full of thinkers who have observed the difference between how things seem and how they might actually be; that is not new, but perhaps the simple idea of consumer-level access to unbelievably sophisticated technology has leveraged a new kind of experience for the material world where simulation theory is just as plausible an experience as a physical eye examination.

Is much of the meaning of the work parenthetical?

Well, for me, inside my own brain, no, not at all. It is never unintended, rarely unimplied, never debris or the luck of the readymade. Of course, I’m not denying intuitive accident or process-navigated intentions, but I work at the ideas within something quite obsessively. I draw them, I try to write them, I

diagram, I make lists, I photograph things in process over and over on my phone so I can look at them when I'm not in the studio to see if anything has changed, how I might feel at a slight remove, to check they're still there. I like to see the reality of the things I'm making slide next to one another, like little fractional bursts. I see more connections that way, too, so these images are like little gifts, things that in all their possible beauty or excitement or disappointment never don't provoke. When I alight on an idea, it often concretizes in an avalanche of connected meanings, like a ghost that has previously been skirting your bed and moaning but whose face now finally becomes discernible and, more excitingly, addressable. You can banish or encourage. I don't just force forms, colours, materials, graphics together randomly or to simply stuff a work with so much possibility that ambiguity and conjunctive feasibility give way to most anything anyone would want to project on it. That ill-specificity horrifies me. I plan out associated formal meanings: how a certain texture is connotative, how so much is preloaded with symbolism—be that text and thus language, or memory, psychology, social theory, etc.—and how to deny that or build onto it in new ways. When critique mentions the “readymade” or “domestic debris” in my work, I have to say I feel a little heartbroken! I can't bear junk. And I am a deeply methodical person. I never have anything “lying around.” Of course, both the decorative and the functional have deep critical substance, and those modes are very much celebratory mechanisms of framing a human relationship to the material world, but when I'm literally creating every single part of my works, parts that might approximate or deceive, yes, but that are committedly brought into this world by the decisions I make for them, they become part of an entirely new intention. That is a shifted conversation. I aim to construct image like I aim to construct language: I plan, a skeleton emerges, and around that, I hope to weld connections, build fat; the process is difficult and unbudging; singular isolated parts look back at you like philosophy and feel impenetrable, so I panic, step aside and beg, literally pouring so much into the process of slivering away at a lump or carefully stacking a pile until the whole thing feels chiselled enough to communicate, to label and dispatch. Maybe this continual lapse into metaphor is irritating, but genuinely, I believe in the cosmic identity of engrained lines of connectivity, and I feel genuine, heart-soaring joy when these rhythms of meaning suddenly feel so absurdly obvious. The world is full of conspiracy. When you stumble upon things, or they unveil themselves in absurd and unpredicted succession, it is like feeling you have stepped behind the simulation and that is clarity.

The range of your material is tsunamic and clearly non-hierarchical. How do you decide what materials to use in any single piece and then, beyond that, how do you decide what pieces belong in any single installation? I realize this question is so broad that it can go anywhere and nowhere; it's a question as a sow's ear relying on the answer as a silk purse. Maybe there are two questions here—one of material and one on the relationship between and among objects.

I suppose the same question applies to one's own vocabulary, the nuances and levels within it—your daily language, your projections, ego, intelligence, rage, etc.—the deployment is various and subject to countless thousands of micro adjustments every time you speak.

Articulatory most often comes from knowledge, but it can also root down in panic, and thus artifice or drama. I think the same can be said for substance. Of course, there are classic materials that are default “appropriate” categories for things—for support, for lateral surface, for implied crappiness, for implied security, for enclosure, for speed, for hygiene, for delay. The tool, the jig, the prototype—these are the beginning containers for politics. Material is political! It shrieks and harnesses labour, culture, commerce in countless thousands of ways. Anyone who tells you that objects are not overtly political is painfully naïve to the granular mercantile nature of being alive. And I mean everything! Judgment, dexterity and care are also exercised by the maker, which gives sculpture a speed, an attitude or a temperature. Things can be made well or badly, but the line between how those categorical distinctions are made is very fine. The beaded overlapping bleeds of a TIG weld will have many aficionados, all desiring a different quality, an altered slant, a wider puddle or different heated colour from the next person along. This is content, even if quiet. It is literally like diagramming speech and intention. I think about all these things. I think about what is within my reach, what I know I can do well because I am technically initiated in the process, what I can violate and get away with because I suspect it will “work,” even if not conventional, and I think about what I can't do because I'm not equipped, so thus how might I adapt or bricolage, or deliberately steer towards what might be considered “poor craft.” The craftsmanship of risk is fascinatingly alive with potential. I like that a cereal box, for instance, could be mobilized in many different ways: as a container, it's a universal motif of stable breakfast; its Western social familiarity is ubiquitous, so perhaps then an easy motif for family. Perhaps it is propaganda, too, highly dispersible information with sugary coating. Its containment values are effortless—it is a box, after all, so perhaps with these rectangular proportions it might simulate a model of a building; many cereal boxes together become many buildings and thus many people. Everything is a newly live approximation. These extrapolations go further when you take into consideration the graphic branding on the box exteriors. There are many portals: perhaps there are cartoons with their wide googly eyes; perhaps there are large text pictures, or images of people that one way or another signal to stereotypes and how they might be used to empower or abuse the consumer. Any additive material is a grammatical riff on these characteristics: adding a ribbon might make a road or a family tree; appliquéing wooden balls is a topographical gesture, isolating the contours of speech, deliberately insinuating stagger or delay, or marking an invitation to pull the front surface open like a cupboard. These additive gestures don't follow a recipe, but they are portions of logic that can be wielded in exactly the same way as a colour. And within that, every material gesture (colour/shine/density/grain, etc.) contains indexes of implication or association at different levels of legibility, from the most obvious to the most oblique. Artists stick their noses into these indexes and shuffle things about, coaxing things out or relegating them to the peripheries like little aggravating archaeologists. We stack, and those chains of carefully arranged information get condensed and laminated into a single surface like songs. I like these associative modes of connecting visual parts of an object, because the structural rhythms within them act very explicitly like grammar, and grammar, for me, is an invitation to add or subtract.

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Writing A Play (dark blue orchard), 2023, steel, aluminum, bird's eye maple, tulip wood, maple, birch plywood, particle board, magnets, nylon inks, sand cast aluminum, cardboard, cast resin, cast Jesmonite, cast pewter, glazed ceramics, paper, stitched fabric, LED screens, CGI animation, sound (27 minutes, 50 seconds), 281 × 520 × 464 centimetres.

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Installation view, "Evidence of Theatre," 2023, Greene Naftali Gallery, New York.

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1. *Dust of Equivalent Squares* (detail), 2023, "Evidence of Theatre," aluminum, steel, copper, oak, Valchromat, nylon inks, resin, cast Jesmonite, sand cast aluminum, variegated gold leaf, leatherette, cast pewter, fabric, coffee grounds, tree bark, cast polyurethane rubber, plastic, paper, glass marbles, prosthetic glass eye, 152 × 148 × 243 centimetres.

2. *Dust of Equivalent Squares* (detail), 2023, aluminum, steel, copper, oak, Valchromat, nylon inks, resin, cast Jesmonite, sand cast aluminum, variegated gold leaf, leatherette, cast pewter, fabric, coffee grounds, tree bark, cast polyurethane rubber, plastic, paper, glass marbles, prosthetic glass eye, 152 × 148 × 243 centimetres.

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1. *Women counting*, 2023, "Evidence of Theatre," aluminum, steel, sand cast aluminum, copper, variegated gold leaf, resin, upholstered foam, model board, embroidered fabric, cast Jesmonite, assorted hardwood, crocheted wool, pearls, plastic, string, pool ball, felted wool, nylon inks, photographs, 212 × 280 × 149 centimetres.

2. Installation view, "Evidence of Theatre," 2023, Greene Naftali Gallery, New York.



Why do you love architecture so much?

Perhaps because it takes the condition of the container and equips it with joyful aesthetic pleasure. It asks how to feel harmony and gravity in equal measures. It proposes at best warmth and dignity, and at worst a literal geography of matter to rage against, to tear down. Architecture is that marvellous combination of poetry and excess, frivolity and deep esteem for the magical elasticity of engineering. It works with community and against

it, too. Think how much worms or ants have taught us about commitment and geometry, how much the simple corn cob has educated about mimicry, about the kernel symmetry of expedient brick pieces and their communal mortar. Architecture is cell, seed, atom. It is history and text and future. If our powers could ever learn how to deploy it equally, it would change the world. ■



Material Language

An Interview with Helen Marten

by Robert Enright