

CÄCILIA BROWN

There are corners you can't get out of anymore.

Bettina Klein, Wien, 2018

The basic material for Cäcilia Brown's exhibition at the Gabriele Senn Gallery are roof beams taken from demolished houses. Following a wave of demolitions, to which approximately 150 historic buildings fell victim to annually, the Viennese government has responded with an amendment to the building code that heralded in these demolitions. As of July of this year, the demolition of traditional Gründerzeit buildings dating from the early twentieth century must first be officially approved. An increased amount of demolitions leading up to the enforcement of this regulation was the result. Often times, only attics are affected, which are demolished for the construction of luxury apartments. Brown calls these the "wealth cap". To make effective use of as much urban space as possible, construction is now increasingly happening vertically as there is barely ground left to build on. Empty spaces are gradually disappearing.

Brown does not address these socioeconomic aspects in an explicitly political (albeit politically motivated) language, but rather, she communicates in a sculptural language that describes and emphasizes the characteristics and peculiarities of the material recovered from the demolished buildings. In a sense, she treats it as archival material. An example is a rough copy of Karl Schwanzer's Contract Chair. The sculpture shows a massive beam, encrusted in pigeon droppings, that acts as the chair's seating surface. It is immediately evident that the beam's considerable length puts a heavy strain on the relatively delicate piece of furniture.

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition "Holz = Kunst-Stoff" (at Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, 1976), the art historian Wolfgang Kemp writes, "Those who insist on the intransigence of materials, do not allow their objectifications to ingratiate themselves".

There's quite a risk of succumbing to a certain "ruin romanticism" when considering the origin and history of the materials. Brown circumvents this in her work by having the material keep its autonomy and by carrying out only minimal interventions. Her sculptures are basically made up of a combination of fragments that lean on, support or lie on top of each other. This is all done without using screws or other means of permanently fixing the items together. Joints, paint stains and other trace remnants are kept for texture.

Sculptures are partly formed using "unsuitable" joints, e.g. casting an old window or a door with concrete and wax. As a modern building material that is used everywhere, the use of concrete in her sculptures illustrates the forceful takeover and transformation of traditional methods of architectural construction. Wax, on the other hand, is of particular interest to the artist because of its fragility and transience – it is combustible, just like the roof beams that often end up in leftover stoves installed in these turn-of-the-century buildings.

Without necessarily making an explicit political statement, the atmospheric density of Brown's sculptures and the refusal to achieve a form and definitely fix it, points towards the fragility of the social fabric. Evidence of fresh cutting marks on old beam fragments transport them into a smooth postmodern present.