

Olga Balema, *Long Arm* (detail),  
2013, latex, aluminum,  
11' 5 1/4" x 4' 11" x 3' 3 1/2".

OPENINGS

# Olga Balema

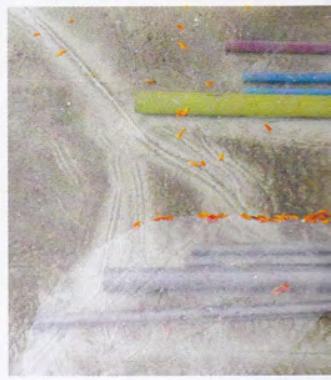
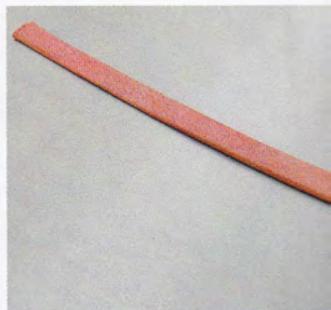
QUINN LATIMER



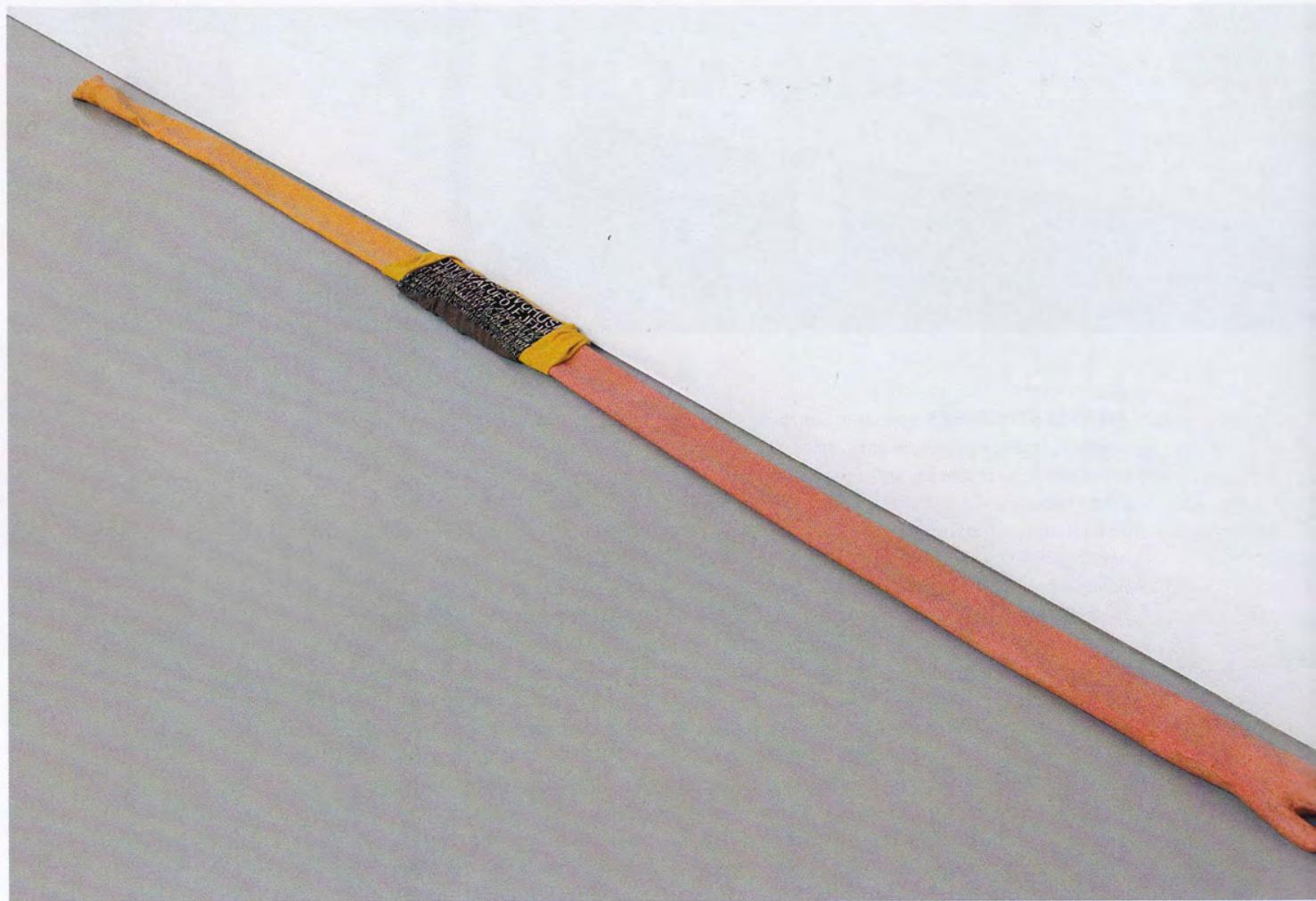
**AN ARM STRETCHES** across a concrete floor, a *Lonely Arm*, 2013. Salmon-colored, latex, it is not, in fact, an arm; it is a glove. Still, the allusion to an arm animates it, narrates its—what—well, technically *material* loneliness. In another white cube, another city, painted-metal and foam-and-latex biomorphic shapes—“Her Curves,” the exhibition’s title tells us, wittily—are leaned and loosed, approximating a brilliant, laconic apparatus, almost ergonomic. Matte and pastel or high gloss and jewel tone, the discrete sculptures shape and are shaped by the room. Like garments or stains or husks—material fragments at once body and chair and dress, all those things that might hold *her*—their minimalism is not predictably haunted by but *hunting* the human body (consider, for example, the narrative of a lonely glove scouring some surface for an arm to attend to).

The artist Olga Balema calls such works, her works, with their deft conflation of the interior and the exterior, “semiastract.” On view at High Art, Paris, in 2014, they might be construed as totally abstract were it not for the figurative bent of their titles and the corporeal metaphors of their forms, which, taken together, call Balema’s works to “her” side. If one has only language to express the pointedly physical nature of these works, and the collusion between the lexical and the corporeal that intimately forms them—the desire to describe

View of “Olga Balema: Her Curves,” 2014, High Art, Paris. From left: *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (feeling natural)*, 2014; *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (more comfortable)*, 2014; *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (silver chasm and sunrise)*, 2014; *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (sunset)*, 2014.



Clockwise, from left: Olga Balema, *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (more comfortable)*, 2014, steel, foam, latex, pigment, hardware, 42 x 22 x 20". View of "Olga Balema: Her Curves," 2014, High Art, Paris. Foreground: *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (looking at a tree)*, 2014. Background: *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (feeling natural)*, 2014. Olga Balema, *Lonely Arm*, 2013, latex, 3 1/4 x 91 1/4 x 4 1/4". Olga Balema, *untitled (detail)*, 2013, PVC, water, steel, acrylic paint, chili peppers, concrete, 47 1/2 x 78 3/4 x 5 1/4". From the series "Untitled," 2013-. Olga Balema, *Long Arms with Letter Sweater*, 2013, latex, textile, 3" x 6 1/2" x 14' 1 1/2".



At once haptic and sealed off, Balema's works change over time, the materials shifting, decomposing.



View of "Olga Balema: What Enters," 2013, 1646, The Hague. Photo: Nico Feragnoli.

the body, in both text and space—then so be it, for one is always in language in Balema's work, called over to its side (my metaphor reaching again for the body, like the artist's long *Lonely Arm*). The language of art history, yes—her High Art show conjured the polymorphous perversity of a ménage-à-trois among Lynda Benglis's poured sculptures, Bruce Nauman's psychological cast fragments, and Alina Szapocznikow's Pop-inflected, very material feminism, while offering an art-in-the-age-of-the-Internet riposte to the “living brushes” of Yves Klein's *Anthropométries*, 1958–62. But also present is the lexicon in which we parse and picture and narrate the physical and psychic body—its contents and discontents. Consider how writing runs through Balema's work in her poetic press releases, which set the scene (of her concerns): “In a living room. / Legs crossed to form a point of departure, she follows the lines as they travel along biologically. / Surprised, a word spills from her mouth.”

Born in Ukraine and based in Amsterdam and Berlin, Balema earned her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2009. Among these disparate sites, her concern with communication—and the imaginative, ideological, and material space between subject and object—likely emerged. Nevertheless, it's the body—literary, technological, biological, and largely female, it seems, and filled with desire—that illuminates Balema's work with a kind of philosophical consciousness that is rare, welcome. Her sculptures and paintings break down the predictable binaries of subject/object, matter/language, body/writing, instead

looping through and among them, nonhierarchically.

See “Body of Work,” her exhibition at Galerie Fons Welters in Amsterdam in 2013, which featured a constellation of rusted-steel objects laced with white, wispy 3-D-printed textiles that stood out against them like gnomic signs; latex gloves conjoined with word-smeared sweaters; fountain-like buckets filled with soaked, text-strewn T-shirts; and prints on canvas communicating such unfluent, enigmatic sentiments as I DREAMT I HELD YOU IN MY / AND I HUNG MY HEAD AND I / YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE, MY / BUT NOW YOU'VE LEFT ME, A / ND LOVE ANOTHER (*You Are My Sunshine*, 2013). The etymology of the show was the cadence of the error-filled T-shirts the artist first saw in Shanghai—but that proliferate across the non-English-speaking world—adorned with text directly (mis)translated from Chinese. The strange, sad language that results cancels the clichés of the original writing—wonderfully—while suggesting a translation process that can't quite decode and compress the distance between the need to communicate and one's means, between culture and meaning, between representative models and individual bodies.

“The libido is defined as an energy of strange material consistency,” philosopher Catherine Malabou writes in her essay “Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*”:

It is often presented as a substance that is neither liquid nor solid but something in between. “Fluid” or, precisely, “plastic” are terms often used by Freud to characterize this type of amazing materiality. The

libido is sometimes compared to a river. . . . At other times, Freud uses the metaphor of protoplasmic liquid, which is a little thicker than sheer water. . . . The plasticity of the libido thus designates the double ability to cling to the object and to abandon it.

Why do I keep coming back to this passage when thinking about Balema's series of untitled floor pieces made since 2013, transparent rectangular plates containing water, concrete, and steel, among other materials? They were shown at 1646 gallery, in The Hague, in 2013, and paired by the artist with a passage from Vladimir Nabokov's 1924 story “*La Veneziana*,” which ecstatically describes merging with the material qualities of paintings. The works' plastic packaging, which holds them together—modernist landscapes and speculative specimens of refuse both, Petri dishes all—glimmers and warps under the gallery lights. The abject compositions are watery orange or pink grounds; poles and fabric litter them, are suspended expertly within them. At once haptic and sealed off, the works change over time, the materials shifting, decomposing. Malabou writes, “The time of materiality would be prior to the time of pleasure.” If there is a libido at work here, it is in the pleasure and pain of decay, and in that decay's framing. The sovereign bodies of Balema's works are mirrors to our matter, their silence beckoning forth our language to describe them, and us. □

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