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Birke Gorm Scavenges for Treasure

At the Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, the artist's recent works explore the politics of human production and consumption

BY KRZYSZTOF KOŚCIUCZUK IN EU REVIEWS, EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 28 APR 23



In a dimly lit, vaulted basement of Vienna's Museum of Applied Arts, nine larger-than-life headless figures sit slumped against the walls, their torsos crafted of sturdy jute bags with shoulder straps hooked onto the wall, arms crossed like tangled fire hoses, legs spread apart (*sit-up 1–5*, 2022). Part of the exhibition 'Dead Stock', by Vienna-based artist Birke Gorm, these beaten-up mannequins – surrounded by neatly arranged sets of rusted metal and mechanical parts, keys and aluminium cans, piles of broken glass and ceramics – could be mistaken for the discarded components of a museum display. Sitting amidst these objects, they look both helpless and as if they are attempting to protect the hoarded treasure they have been entrusted with.



Birke Gorm, 'dead stock', 2023, exhibition view, Museum of Applied Arts Vienna. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Photograph: © kunst-dokumentation.com

Gorm studied both painting (University of Fine Arts, Hamburg) and sculpture (Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna), but it is textile design – which she learned in Denmark, where she grew up – that is the true driver of her practice. Her works in jute are a case in point. These began with the series 'I Can Smile at the Past' (2018–ongoing), which draws on scenes from one of Europe's oldest *Totentanz* murals (Dance of Death, c.1435–40), likely painted by Konrad Witz for the city of Basel in response to an outbreak of bubonic plague in 1439. Formed from single sheets of light-brown jute, the threads of which the artist unravelled then restitched, Gorm's textile panels feature life-sized skeletons caught in a frenetic dance, except there is no one around to follow them. In alluding to the common cultural trope of death as the ultimate equalizer while simultaneously emphasizing the manual labour undergirding her work, Gorm articulates a recurring rift in the social tissue that returns with all tectonic shifts across the globe, including the Great Plague. The spirit of such uprisings was encapsulated in a rousing sermon delivered in 1381 by the 14th-century British priest John Ball: 'When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman? From the beginning, all men by nature were created alike [...] And therefore I exhort you to cast off the yoke of bondage and recover liberty.'



Birke Gorm, *sit-up (1)* (detail), 2022, jute, wastepaper, rusty metal scraps, textile scraps, 113 × 140 × 130 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Photograph: © kunst-dokumentation.com

Expanding on the ideas at the heart of 'I Can Smile at the Past', Gorm further explores the politics of human production and consumption in 'Dead Stock'. Encircled by discarded, human-made objects, as though part of some magical ritual, the jute figures are also vessels stuffed with shredded newspaper, packing material and rebar rods, pinned to the wall like bags. Each sculpture shares the same rusty-brown palette of recycled cardboard and scrap metal and is lit by bare lightbulbs, the cords of which snake across the museum floor (*Standard Hardware*, 2023).



Birke Gorm, *sit-up (4)*, 2022, jute, wastepaper, rusty metal scraps, textile scraps, glass, 140 × 165 × 280 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Photograph: © kunst-dokumentation.com

Accompanying the exhibition is a short story by the artist – a brilliant account of her father's life, replete with a catalogue of items he collected and diligently stored in his house for decades until it had to be emptied. For Gorm, everything animate and inanimate is a vessel that collects and contains until it can no longer hold and its contents spill out: one person's trash, as they say, is another's treasure. If the artist's recent works can be seen as both collections and containers, what lies at the root of her practice is the process of scavenging – or, to use an agrarian metaphor for gathering what is left after a harvest, 'gleaning'. 'Dead Stock' is an exercise in gleaning in a late capitalist landscape where surplus translates as market incompatibility and, ultimately, death.

Birke Gorm's 'Deadstock' is on view at the Museum of Applied Arts Vienna until 25 June

Main image: Birke Gorm, *sit-up (5)* (detail), 2022, jute, wastepaper, rusty metal scraps, textile scraps, 120 × 160 × 270 cm.

Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Photograph: © kunst-dokumentation.com

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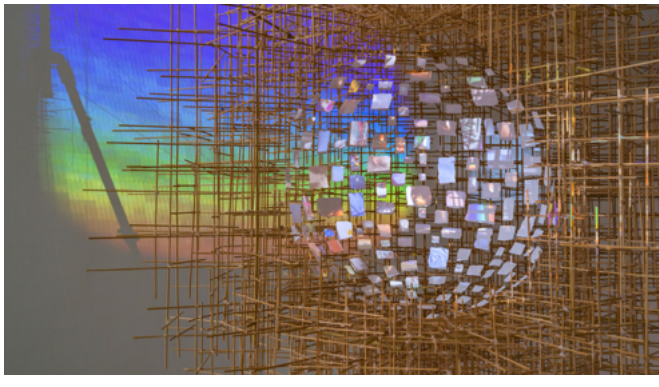
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