

IAN LAW: DRIPS THE ROOM

Review by Chris McCormack
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Captured across several domestic artefacts, minimalist constructions and texts, Ian Law's exhibition *drips the room* surveys the often fraught crosscurrents of interdependency, a condition where marginalised bodies appear or the unacknowledged life takes root. For this first solo show in London for five years, Law continues to draw in and rub out pensive, withdrawn or obscured constellations of where things might meet or, perhaps, misalign.

Bath Text (i-xiv), 2020, comprises 14 book-sized pages that punctuate the gallery walls. Law's short fragmentary texts do not build a singular or coherent narrative, but instead return kaleidoscopic shards from what seems to be the otherwise ever-enclosing limits of an apartment or home, ushering in an unsettled and erotic condition of interiority. Picturing scenes such as "the bodies emerge as if dreamt / with anatomical impossibility / transient to me", Law writes of the legibility of the private self as something wayward and uncategorisable.

The haiku-like arrangements were partially arrived at when Law accidentally dropped the book he was reading in the bath. Law describes a growing pink mould that slowly took over the book's pages, returning the otherwise settled arrangement of the printed edition into a series of shorthand notes or archaeological fragments for his recalibration. The resulting bloom, what might be partly described as Law's bio-signature from the warm milky bathwater, becomes a semi-salient writer or voracious reader that extracts and obscures the originary imprint (much like an overzealous student underlining and writing notes in the margin of a library book).

Placed centrally to these texts is *untitled*, 2020, a shop-bought white-laminate chest of drawers. Permission to open the drawers is neither offered nor withheld, but choosing to open the chest reveals a simply assembled ceramic brown ashtray, listed on the press release as being

by Marianne Measures (1970-2010) – who I later learn was Law’s half-sister – and several unpicked worn T-shirts arranged into geometrical order on a bed of potting soil. One is struck by the unexpected odour of earth in the gallery, while the delicately reassembled personal garments with worn hems and slacked cuffs places the viewer somewhere between the twin poles of detective or intruder, questioning the lines between authorized and unauthorised access. The work hints at the way populations are valued and disvalued, protected or dispensable – the palpably short date range of Measures’s lifespan hangs unresolvable – cumulatively appending Law’s bath-time fragments of language with the relational field of the family unit as something labile and easily dissolved. If vulnerability is largely excised by society as part of the dominant need for autonomy, Law redresses it with studied care for the tangible remnants; the work is capacious enough for it to resist being dwarfed by the biographical underpinnings holding it together.

Sculpture becomes something of an outhouse in *She’ll*, 2013/20, which follows the sealed cubic interior dimensions and colour of Law’s childhood home toilet at “Binstead Lodge Road” on the Isle of Wight. Painted in pale green and over 7ft in height, the one lockable room of a house is hermetically rendered by Law, signaling occupancy. Nestled on top and reconfiguring this monolith of sorts into an exaggerated plinth, Law has assembled a potpourri – dried flowers infused with bergamot, mandarin and geranium oils. The wreath-like arrangement, which is only visible from the elevated step of the gallery’s entrance, redefines the claustrophobic finitude of the locked bathroom with the campily ersatz decoration of handcrafted potpourri. Law is exact as to its finish and fragrance: it is both decoratively melancholic and geekily tender, potentially mournful protest and shrine.

Law has previously cited the influence of Absalon’s *Cellules* 1991-92 on his work, a series which comprises models or prototypes for living quarters sized to Absalon’s body that were designed to be installed in major cities such as Frankfurt, Paris and New York, though he died in 1993 before this work was realised. If Absalon’s starkly white housing models were constructed as alternative habitats for living, Law’s are mutely filled and impassable. It is tempting to consider this vision of self-sufficiency – a modelled enclosure from the outside world, with Law’s closed drawers and impenetrable rooms – as precursors for the current lockdown conditions of self-isolation and social-distancing measures to abate the present pandemic. Appropriately, Absalon described *Cellules* as being “like a virus in the city”.

It is often said that civilisation is more than just good plumbing (doubtful) or that privacy or

feelings of shame are what separates humans from animals. Law speculatively casts and mirrors the inscrutable places in which his subjects are briefly apprehended or locked and erased. Near the gallery exit, *untitled*, 2020, forms a limited momentary reprieve. A black-and-white photograph of a ceramic white shoulder, resembling a bent torso, is rendered in extreme close-up, with matted wet hair filling the edge of the frame. The photograph fixes a character in Law's matrix of fragmentary figures and semi-observed scenes, a brief glimmer of something tangible.