

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Katinka Bock

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Katinka Bock 'Radio Piombino'

The poisoned city, the poisoned building and the poisoned body are all intimately related. Katinka Bock's exhibition *Radio Piombino*, at The Common Guild, brought together diverse sculptural elements, including works in bronze, ceramic, copper, cotton, lead, steel and plant material, that conceived the Victorian domestic setting of the gallery as a 'poisoned body'. Poison is no stranger to the building in Woodlands Terrace, but the unwelcome and persistent guest at its birth.

The fine sandstone townhouse at 21 Woodlands Terrace, occupied by The Common Guild, lies in the Park district of Glasgow, a planned development created by the architect Charles Wilson in the 1850s. The residential district rose to escape the desperate consequences of the city's industrial and colonial might. Glasgow was killing itself. It had poisoned its own water supply, was ravaged by typhus and by cholera epidemics transmitted in the intimacy of its unsanitary living conditions. The Park district provided nothing for the urban poor, but the knowledge acquired about public health in the city's poorest streets informed the creation of a green lung in the adjacent park and the light through the huge windows that so benefits the exhibitions that have been presented there. The rich men and their families who lived in the district rose above the miasma. Or thought they did. In truth, their wonderful clean water, brought from Loch Katrine in 1859, was circulated through lead pipes in houses that were filled with lead paint and coal dust and lived in by people who were regularly medicated by poisons like opium and laudanum.

Britain in the mid-1850s was also at the height of another kind of poisoning: murder by poison.¹ No poisoning was more notorious than the 1857 trial in Glasgow of a young woman named Madeleine Smith who had conducted a secret sexual relationship with Pierre Emile L'Angelier, an apprentice nurseryman. When her family arranged a suitable marriage, Smith attempted to break her connection with

L'Angelier. Instead, he threatened to expose her. On the morning of 23 March 1857, L'Angelier died from arsenic poisoning. He is buried in the Ramshorn Cemetery on Ingram Street in Glasgow. Could a scandalous murder trial impact on the kind of people who built and lived in the houses in Park? It could: Madeleine Smith's father was the architect James Smith who built much of the city's business district, her grandfather was the eminent neoclassical architect David Hamilton who built Hutcheson's Hospital. When Smith walked free she married an artist, George Wardle, who was William Morris's business manager.

Much of the bronze cast sculpture that greeted visitors to Bock's exhibition seemed poisoned, heavy, inert. Take the series of cast bronze fish: the carp beached upon a radiator where the nearest water was just centimetres away but completely inaccessible because it circulates the house entirely contained in cast iron piping. The plaice that seemed to have washed up from under the bathroom door and landed on the stairs. But above all, Bock's installation evoked poison in its repeated use of found lead piping as a sculptural form. That wonderful, malleable, effective material that has been so useful in domestic plumbing over the centuries and so dangerous in its effect on the human body when ingested. According to public health expert, Jerome Nriagu, who has argued that the overuse of lead created a health crisis that was responsible for the decline of the Roman Empire.

Although there was never a "Lead Age" (lead romanticism did not dominate any period of human history), lead and its compounds were nevertheless present in all the metal ages and have certainly played important roles in industrial, scientific and military progress as well as in trade, material comfort, human vanity and curing of diseases.²

Historians speculate on a number of reasons why Britain in the 1850s was at the height of a poisoning epidemic: the quickening pace of industrialisation and urbanisation, the accessibility of poisons for domestic and industrial purposes, the lack of legal remedies such as divorce, and the inequity of domestic service. But I think

it is particularly important, for the precise language of sculpture that Katinka Bock is interested in, that in the nineteenth century detection rates were beginning to increase through sciences such as toxicology. Bock shows us again and again that every contact leaves a trace.

Conversation suspended, Glasgow installed in the glorious upstairs drawing room consisted of five suspended ceramic ‘collars’. These elements were figures in conversation. But a ‘conversation piece’ is also a particular genre of eighteenth century portraiture, a new kind of informal portrait. Conversation pieces describe a landscape—spatial, financial, and physical—that extends beyond the limits of the body. These ceramic pieces weren’t just fired in a kiln. Each was somehow seasoned prior to exhibition. One rested in a fine flat in Glasgow’s West End, another was submerged in the great Clyde Estuary, one accrued a certain oiliness in a celebrated seafood restaurant.

How might we describe these actions? Curing, tanning, ageing: a different kind of synaesthetic glaze that we might describe as the patina of scent, the aura of unspoken experience. Sculpture possesses an inherent complexity about in and out, interior and exterior, void and form, cause and effect even when, as in this exhibition, it is irretrievably polluted. Bock’s bronze fish are complicated by the skeleton and skin of the original fish that remain embedded within the material.

Why might poison be important to a sculptor? For an artist interested in transformative processes, one answer might lie in its economy. In the artist’s words: “poison is so efficient.” In its most effective operation it can make changes without apparent evidence. Yet in subsequent investigation, it almost always affirms a causality, a trace that is similarly present in most of Bock’s works. Poison is also compelling because it is unruly: the processes it involves—inhaling, swallowing, ingesting—result in such terrible alchemy. Poison is invisible violence. The self-poisoning of industrial capitalism is hubris.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the smallest of Bock’s works: a tiny piece

of botanical material, a real apple stalk embedded in the wall. An apple stalk is a stem, a tiny pipe, the apple’s umbilical cord, or even its throat. It is the means by which water and nutrients are transported and finally transformed into flesh. It’s the apple’s plumbing. In Woodlands Terrace, one can’t escape plumbing. No age is the lead age, because it turns out that every era is the age of lead.

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1. Karen Jane Merry, *Murder by poison in Scotland during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries*. PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2010.

2. J Nriagu, ‘History in lead and lead poisoning in history.’ Abstract in R. T. Watson, M. Fuller, M. Pokras, and W. G. Hunt (Eds.). *Ingestion of Lead from Spent Ammunition: Implications for Wildlife and Humans*. The Peregrine Fund, Boise, Idaho, USA, 2009. DOI 10.4080/ilsa.2009.0102



Front: Katinka Bock, *Conversation suspended, Glasgow*, 2018. Ceramic, copper pipes.

Above: Katinka Bock, *P-Plaice*, 2018. Bronze.

Below: Katinka Bock, *Piombino*, 2018. Lead pipes. *Sand*, 2018. Ceramic.

Photographs by Ruth Clark.