

Bianca Stoppani, "Kerstin Brätsch ' _ Ruine / Kaya_KOVO' at Fondazione Memmo, Roma,"
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REVIEWS

Kerstin Brätsch " _ Ruine / KAYA_KOVO" at Fondazione Memmo, Roma

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Kerstin Brätsch "KAYA _KOVO" at Fondazione Memmo, Rome, 2018.
Photo: Daniele Molajoli Courtesy: Fondazione Memmo, Rome

I heard a popular common saying on my way to the city center: "Vedi Roma e muori," which means that if you've been to Rome, you've seen everything, and so you can peacefully die. Notwithstanding the more or less candid affirmation of Western cultural supremacy, I was interested to think about how it conveys an ambiguous dimension, as if the Eternal City and its symbols belong to an exceeding spatio-temporal continuum. And in fact, ruins are these quintessential sites of material and temporal ambivalence, for they are both products and events, constantly embedding and heralding their mutations. In this guise, *_Ruine*, the German word for "ruin" and the title of Kerstin Brätsch's solo exhibition at Fondazione Memmo in Rome, is an architectural capriccio, a fictitious uber-ruin that brings together an ANTICHAMBER, a CRYPT, and a FORUM in the same space-time. Brätsch magically spells it out by distributing monumental wooden frames that stretch a plastic film, thus tapping into the ubiquitous transparency of glass. Their function is to expose and blur, to separate and merge. In fact, these rectangular devices play supporting-surfacing roles: they become the recurrent signs bordering the area of the show where one is (and, constitutively, is not), while they also become the press releases for *_Ruine* and *_KOVO* (more soon about the latter) all handwritten by Brätsch on the semi-transparent sheets. The reference is to the partitions used by Allan Kaprow in *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959), his seminal elaboration on the legacy of the performative aspect of Jackson Pollock's painting that eventually made him abandon the latter for the making of

ordinary events.¹ Brätsch does not reject painting, but she contests its apparatus of interpellated, and thus individuated, gestures via the redistribution of her authorial role to collective enterprises, such as the import-export agency DAS INSTITUT (2007–ongoing, with artist Adele Röder), or the entropic accrual of subjectivities KAYA (2010–ongoing, with sculptor Debo Eilers and Kaya Serene), as well as to the other artists and craftspeople she collaborates with. In her many hands, painting is licensed by different ventures, thus becoming a “performance or a performative backdrop” to stress test the stability of those assumptions.² For example, the intense blue tempera that covers the cross-vaulted ceilings of the ANTICHAMBER (Ave Giotto _Cielo [2018]) was actually applied on Brätsch’s behalf by master stucco marbler Walter Cipriani and conservator Carolina d’Ayala Valva.

My gaze was already caught up in this imaginative open sky—its sheer opacity being as light and volatile as Hans Haacke’s *Blue Sail* (1964–1965)—such that I could not but notice the Palazzo’s supporting beams, wrapped in digital prints of marble patterns where images of dinosaurs, marblings, and agates miraculously float together (*Dino Runes (towards an alphabet)* [2018]). This constellation of immemorial yet digitally produced forms offered itself coextensively with those displayed in the CRYPT. Inducing a sense of wonder, its lowered ceiling dramatized the scale of *Psychopompo* (2017), the latest iteration from the *Unstable Talismanic Renderings* series of marblings realized by Brätsch with master marbler Dirk Lange. The aforementioned black partitions—now leaning on the walls in their traditional role of frames for large-scale works—were accessorized with pairs of asymmetric fluorescent lights, thus saturating the blue color of the room (Ave Giotto _Stanza [2018]) in a glossy, retro-illuminated effect. The *Psychopompos* depict the process of their creation, that is, the “[drop of] a drop of ink from high (the height determines the width of the mark)” into a tray full of solvent.³ But despite its original decorative purpose, marbling operated here as a pictorial hydromantic practice, its magic embedded in the acts-at-a-distance, affecting a responsive surface placed below and resulting in revelatory shapes adhering on paper. This process-as-figure saw globules of bright colors coming together through a sequence of baths, intentionally or casually, in heads of shamans, deep-dreamed faces, apotropaic septarias, dendrites, insects, et cetera. Emerging from the grayish-white background of the first color bath, these fine-textured substances were arranged in delicate, centrifugal circles, swirls, and veinings, their wavy color bands radiating in recombinant flames, rills, and ridges. Mesmerizingly, Brätsch’s *Psychopompos* are not only the result of material metamorphoses, somehow reflecting the metamorphic nature of the marbles they imitate, but also their own harbingers, for the figure of the psychopomp is at once the alchemist transmuting matter through fire, the demon who transports the soul through death, and the transfer between the conscious and the unconscious.⁴

In this vein, and possibly unearthed from the psyche’s deep time that is inhabited by archetypes, as Carl Jung would have it, the FORUM is populated by *Psychic Fossils _Stuccomarmo* (2018), a series of medium- and small-size shiny plates hung on the walls. Brätsch was proposed by Fondazione Memmo to team up with Cipriani and experiment with *scagliola*, a technique invented in the seventeenth century to mimic, once again, the more expensive marble or *pietre dure*.⁵ As such, they can be mistaken for stone formations unless one decides to touch them and realizes they are room temperature. Arcane and unsettling, the writhing acid-colored slimes and Precambrian organisms that, if any, can be described there become the objects of worship for the material mystic, their verisimilitude so startling that they effect what Roger Caillois called the drive of dissolving one’s self in the “inhuman immensity” of matter.⁶ Brätsch’s plaster-based fossils, together with her talismanic minerals on paper, graft the human scale of agency into that of the geological, and eventually displace her artistry to the interaction of matter. Take also for example *Brushstrokes Fossils* (2018): loosely arranged in three stretchers on the floor of the FORUM, they are the repository of the movements that created them, whether human or tectonic.

_Ruine occupied the main space of Palazzo Ruspoli, and darkened into the smaller stable overlooking the courtyard where KAYA staged their solo exhibition _KOVO (both shows were curated by Francesco Stocchi). It was a cave-like space where KAYA aggregated on the walls, on the floor, and was suspended from the ceiling through demonic painting-sculptures. If the press release tells of a rite of evocation, I would provisionally point elsewhere, maybe to an underground place plunged into the unconscious dimension of a libidinal economy, whose residents reflect what is happening above. Among them, different leathers stitched together and painted with bright-colored roundnesses—actually, some elements reminded me of the eyes of Leonora Carrington’s characters—supported shiny black biomorphic shapes tied together with studded belts, and was also embellished with souvenir-size reproductions of the heads of famous soccer players, Donatello’s David, and Pinocchio (KAYA *Pelle* series [2018]). Actually, these hallucinatory assemblages seemed to have been in contact with the horrors of

late capitalism, their infected bodies mutated with purulent cultural commodities.⁷ The amber glass lanterns there (KAYA Lanterna Lamentosa [2018]) could then not but sardonically smile at those schizoid entities, while emitting an ominous track into insect-shaped microphones. As much as ruins (that is, “allegories of thinking itself,” according to Walter Benjamin⁸), *_KOVO* and *_Ruine* triggered a sensual and intellectual speculation on ambivalence that paved the way for the transformation of discrete units and categories into something else, something unstable and liminal. This does not mean that identification was altogether dismissed. On the contrary, carefully administered with the possibility to be somebody, the slipperiness of the subjectivities involved in both exhibitions was a powerful strategy to assert the complexity of their identities—a furtive shift of the question that yawned at the enigma.

1. See Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” (1958), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1–9.
2. Kerstin Brätsch, “My Psychic Atlas,” in BRÄTSCH:, ed. Patrizia Dander (Berlin: Walther Koenig, 2017), 13.
3. Allison Katz, “WHAT IS AT HAND?,” in Kerstin Brätsch: *Unstable Talismanic Renderings* (New York: Gavin Brown’s enterprise, 2014), 179.
4. See Arturo Schwarz, *Cabbalà e alchimia. Saggi sugli archetipi comuni* (Milan: Garzanti Libri, 2004), 13.
5. Stucco marble is obtained by mixing pigments with plaster and glue, kneading the compost into doughs, and cutting them in the preferred directions (this would give different gradients), dimensions, and shapes. Finally, the pieces are either amalgamated in order to get an abstract, marmoreal pattern, or organized on a prearranged drawing, then squashed onto the support and waxed.
6. Roger Caillois, *Pierres*, trans. Jean Burrell (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 90–91.
7. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester and Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2009), 5–6.
8. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: NLB, 1977), 177–178.