

STUBBORN MATERIALS

PETER BLUM CHELSEA, NEW YORK
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The 'stubborn' in Simone Subal's excellent group show *Stubborn Materials* signifies more than mere recalcitrance; it is also meant to imply something of the selected works' general reticence, or more forcefully, their absolute refusal to speak.

Nick Herman's sculptural pieces are perhaps the most wilfully silent, while no doubt having the most to say. With *Halves* (all works 2007) Herman has modelled the heads and front quarters of a sheep and a wolf in fibreglass-reinforced plaster, a pairing which suggests that the two figures, bound by the antagonism of predator and prey, remain incomplete without the other. And a second piece, *Part*, a partial cast of a rock face, hangs on the wall bearing the kind of mute self-evidence with which Jasper Johns's work greeted its public half a century ago.

With these works, what one would call brute material (be it geo- or ecological) is invoked rather than presented on its own terms, and it is a strategy that the artist team of Jonah Freeman and Michael Phelan follow as well with their large-scale scans of variously and vigorously crumpled sheets of aluminium foil, though here the technology itself is given body by the odd, seemingly liquid digitisation which arises at a certain depth of field.

Ian Pedigo and Larry Bamburg offer a different set of strategies, ones which focus more on the dry and mundane. In *Untitled Variable* Bamburg has created a hanging carousel composed of webs of monofilament and the kinds of odds and ends – tape, twist ties, paper clips, a bug carcass – that populate the spaces under couches and behind bookcases. Though larger in scale and less lyrical, Pedigo's castaways – insulating foam, newspaper and magazine pages, a straw mat – appear a bit more daring, insofar as they seem to ask how few moves one can make before this plain and meagre stuff registers as something other than itself.

Rosy Keyser is the sole artist in *Stubborn Materials* working resolutely within the space of painting, and it is to her credit that her pieces stand toe-to-toe with those of Jutta Koether, the only other works in the show that make a run at two dimensions. Both artists approach the vertical plane as a repository, but whereas Koether continuously uses material to mine (and undermine) the conventions of painting (and always, it seems, using liquid glass and the colour black), Keyser, in *Untitled (birds)* and *Sad White Music*, may be seen to draw to the surface Koether's unacknowledged fascination with painting's unique purchase on matters of flow and stasis.

This is a lesson Linda Benglis taught in the late 1960s and early 70s, and the promise of Benglis's practice, and its moment, weighs heavily on Subal's grouping. But *Stubborn Materials* points a way beyond the present anxiety about thinking and rethinking artistic 'material' in general. The artists here are getting down to specifics, demonstrating that the work will speak for itself, even when it refuses to speak up. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*



Stubborn Materials, 2007
(installation view).
Courtesy Peter Blum Gallery, New York