

# ROCHELLE GOLDBERG EVERYTHING THAT GOES UNDER

BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

Rochelle Goldberg's material vocabulary gradates from animate to inanimate: snails, seeds, roots, feathers, hair, clay, crude oil, metal, plastic, light-emitting diodes. Her sculptural installations are ragged topographies, where animal, vegetable, mineral and machine dwell and slow processes—growth, absorption, evaporation—linger in the air. Tangled clumps share the scene with linear steel bars used as armatures and spines, or in freestanding structures that carve through space, creating portals and planes. Often, Goldberg will apply paint or material coatings to the bottom strip of gallery walls, blurring the architectural horizon line. *Everything Sinks*.

Coils of clay have a ubiquitous presence in Goldberg's work, rolled out and impressed with a snake-skin texture, then packed into molds or piled into irregular shapes. This technique is used for a variety of forms, from small, excrement-like droppings to blocks, hands and feet, creatures and faces. Dark metallic glazing lends an oily wetness, as if these shape shifters, emerged from primordial goo, could slither off at any moment. While there's a lot happening in Goldberg's work, there's a marked stillness too. The forms are usually at rest, incubating, frozen, or prone. Breath is slow or even held, the resting heart-beat imperceptible.

In Goldberg's exhibition *The Plastic Thirsty* (2016) at New York's SculptureCenter, large skeletal fish crept along the floor (phan-

toms, restlessly searching for water?) and the steel outline of a steam engine, *Iron Oracle* (2016), emerged, ghostly, from a corridor. In *No Where, Now Here* (2016) oil-soaked pelicans gathered in a slick of chia seeds, in and around the suggestions of a submerged ruin. At Federico Vavassori gallery in Milan, *The Cannibal Actif* (2016) featured reptilian snouts pushing up through cylindrical stands, as if blindly thrashing for food or escape; elsewhere in the exhibition, live snails, imported from a nearby garbage pile, left slimy trails of oil and chia. The works *Hands Replace the Deck* (2016) and *Brick Birthing Station* (2016) both feature clusters of small dark things that appear to feed off of glowing fiber optic cables, nesting in plastic. Industrial and biological coevolution is a recurrent theme in Goldberg's work, but not as an expression of particular environmental concerns. Rather, it speaks to a deep curiosity about the velocity and instability of earthly substances, orders, and beings.

Goldberg's most recent exhibition, *Intralocutors* (all works 2017), is her most human-centric to date, drawing inspiration from ancient female ascetics. These "desert mothers," women who abandoned society to lead solitary lives, have often been cast as reformed harlots seeking salvation, denying their lust and saving men from temptation (so goes the tales of Mary of Egypt). Others have deemed them radicals, escaping the limited roles patriarchal societies prescribed them; like many accounts of women from early Chris-





tianity, the ascetics' have been suppressed and rewritten. Virgin/slut archetypes are molds that desire and spirits get pressed into; an independent woman is a threat to social order. Stories are like plant species: cultivated, propagated, and adapted to the climate.

The stoic *Gate Keeper X*, a recurrent entity in Goldberg's installations, stands at the entrance to the exhibition, with a ceramic head suspended in a body resembling an abstracted metal dress form. Her face is the same face repeated throughout the exhibition on figures that seem deeply absorbed in their own interior worlds. Several emerge from elevated horizontal slabs, carved to echo the gallery's sections of tiled floor (for *Virus*, a white carved slab is affixed to a gallery wall, calling up parasitic mimicry). In *Blink to Blank Back*, the prone figure is framed by a delicate net of nylon string dotted with white feathers and anchored by a cluster of glowing cables (Shelter? Halo? Crystalline cobweb?).

Other figures stand, slightly hunched, clinging to garments of matted hair (choice among hermits) that tightly coat their arms. *Intralocutor*, "Do you believe in good and bad?", one of a pair in the very back corner of the space, is draped instead with a clear plastic bag, which catapults her into a different time signature, though it doesn't provide much for modesty. Her counterpart, *Intralocutor*, "Can you make the bad good again?", seems to be the most exteriorized of all, head tilted upward in a searching gaze. Clay's unique plasticity is owed to the thin films of water that slide between crystals; when the water evaporates, the crystals can't move across one another. Think of these *Intralocutor* clay bodies drying out like once living bodies, desiccated by the desert and its insatiable thirst. Ascetics entombed as sculpture; body as matter, a collection of

consistencies (fluid, pliant, calcified).

Two low-lying sculptures are made in the image of train track switches, with curving, intersecting channels. *Leaked Into Fixture X* is propped up on darkly glazed ceramic feet and coils, while *Lives between dead lines* rests on plump, knobby ginger roots; an expansive pool of spilled chia seeds flows between them. Goldberg noticed these track forms in the ground surrounding her studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, buried remnants surfaced in the process of the site's impending regeneration. Once integral, then obsolete, now nostalgic. Everything that goes under must come up.

Like many of Goldberg's exhibitions, *Intralocutors* has a theatrical quality, presenting as a set stage or allegorical diorama. This condition serves to heighten the artist's generative collisions of time, matters, and material. There is the pull of expansion, a tumbling out towards the largess of existence and millennia, the tempos and mechanics we cannot hope to comprehend. Yet there's contraction too, distillation, movement through a passageway into a space bound within its own limits and logics (a gallery, a cave).

No Where, Now Here, 2016 Installation view, GAMeC, Bergamo, 2016 (opposite page) Installation view, *Intralocutors*, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2017 Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York (p. 123) No Where, Now Here, 2016 Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2016 (pp. 124-125)

