

ARTFORUM

Claudia Comte

BOLTELANG



View of “Claudia Comte,” 2015–16

Photo: Alexander Hana.

Back in art school, Claudia Comte’s classmates called her *la tronçonneuse*, Miss Chainsaw. She hates the nickname, but there’s no question that she’s a virtuoso of the rip and call of the saw. There’s a tension between this more or less brutal tool and the extraordinary craft demonstrated in her work. For her most recent solo show, “Sonic Geometry,” she installed nine sculptures from the series “Giant Bones,” 2015: animal bones scaled up to dinosaur scope in polished olive wood, sitting on (or in) black wooden cubes. All had been cut freehand with chain saws before being sanded down, revealing

the knots or, as Germans say, the *Augen* (literally “eyes”) in the timber. Even more remarkably, the perfectly parallel grooves that striate the surface of the cubes were hand cut with a chain saw as well.

Around the walls was mounted a series of circular monochrome paintings, from the series “Turn and Slip,” 2013–. These recall eyespots, ocelli, the markings on insect wings that are supposed to startle predators. An almost universal element in systems of ornament—especially those of a protective kind—eyespots flip the relationship between art and spectator: The object is now watching you. Comte makes these paintings in a single gesture, dipping a very wide brush in black paint and then sweeping it over a circular canvas whose radius is the same width as the brush. Very Zen, very *ensō*, except that Comte’s paintings hardly resemble Japanese calligraphy. Many are too big—up to about four and a half feet in diameter—their eyes too cartoonishly nervous. These eyes, along with the knots in the timber, seem to hold the viewer under an uncanny surveillance, whether animal, alien, or mechanical—for each recalls both an animal’s iris and a mechanical shutter with a slice of light reflecting off the curve of the lens. The entire installation evokes a set from a lost film by Stanley Kubrick.

What is a painterly act, anyway? Lacan has a line in his eleventh seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, published in 1973, where he describes painting as akin to an interrupted gesture—the canvas gets in between the painter and the outside world. Although painting turns a movement into an image, the gesture is not wholly without effect, for painting serves as a protection against the evil eye by preemptively fulfilling its goal. The displayed gestures that make up paintings are frozen movements, as if some Medusa really had turned the artist to stone—OK, it’s just the paint that dried, but you get the point. The evil eye is caught by a fascination with its own effect, or—put it in cockney, rather than Lacanese—it’s arrested because it’s “copped an eyeful.” Comte’s larger paintings, which take so much physical strength and grace to make, thereby recall a kind of apotropaic magic.

The arrangements of wooden cubes closely corresponded to the appearance of the bones resting on them. They were oriented so that the parallel lines either continued uninterrupted along their surface, suggesting rapid growth and elongation, or so that the lines interrupted each other, implying the knitting of heavier bone. The combinations suggested genetic code more than mere plinths. They were laid out in the space as if according to invisible guidelines in a projective geometry, as if Comte was establishing laws of perspective. The cubes recall the open constructions of Sol LeWitt, but also modular office furniture, the arranging and rearranging of which might appear to be a major human concern to any aliens unfortunate enough to be watching us. It makes sense for the sculptures to be bones, for they suggest what it is that Comte’s eyespots might see when they unblinkingly gaze at us with such fascination—X-rayed forms in an X-rayed space, moving skeletons curtained with diaphanous meat and carrying executive toys.

—*Adam Jasper*