

## Monkeying with Mozart: the striking art of Helen Marten

Still in her 20s, Helen Marten makes art that is rich in detail, oddity and jokes. Adrian Searle is bowled over by her infectious new show

**Adrian Searle**

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It's a jungle out there ... a toy by Danish designer Kay Bojesen, in Possible Starch, 2012, by Helen Marten. All photographs: Graham Turner for the Guardian

A group of chairs writhe on the wall, held up by bent steel bars and giant forged nails whose heads are as big as fists. The black metal chairs are like cartoon silhouettes lurching into the third dimension, confused by their own shadows. Dangling here and there from the legs and armrests are bundles of keys, the sort of keys you accumulate but have forgotten what they're for. With their silly key-ring charms, and all jangling with light, I wonder what it is they unlock. Knowledge, perhaps. The whole arrangement is called Traditional Teachers of English Grammar.

**Helen Marten**  
**Plank Salad**  
Chisenhale gallery,  
London E3

Until 27 January 2013  
[Full details](#)

I turn to the artist's writing for help, but it doesn't. Helen Marten, an artist still in her 20s, and whose [Chisenhale Gallery exhibition](#) has travelled from Zurich en route to the US, has taken tradition, and the English language, off on her own tack in her interviews and statements. Someone asks her a sensible question and she answers by making a comparison between perfume and a multi-

storey car park. "I like to imagine," she says, "that there's a formula for smelling attractive and one for parking your car." I imagine the car park tang, and a smell drifting in space, unconfined. What Marten says has an unassailable logic that's all her own, and is a perfect equivalent of the things she makes, with their strange meetings and odd conjunctions, her care for materials and construction, her tightly controlled moments of random disorder. The trouble is, I don't think anything at all is random here, but I'm plunged into uncertainty. It's a good place to be.



Traditional Teachers

of English Grammar, 2012, by Helen Marten

Someone asks her a sensible question and she answers by making a comparison between perfume and a multi-storey car park. 'I like to imagine', she says, for an interview coinciding with this show, 'that there's a formula for smelling attractive and one for parking your car'. I imagine the car park tang, and a smell drifting in space, unconfined.} In another interview (she seems to like the form), Marten talks about how walking through a city can be like unfolding a love letter: "Stepping in and out of intimacies. The secret bits, the dirty parts." This is very like the experience of looking at this show, which is called Plank Salad and subtitled "muscular soup (or what happens to image when substance goes on a diet)" – all of which sounds a bit indigestible. Those chairs are definitely dealing with a need to get off the wall and turn from flat image into actual substance.

"Olive" reads the lettering on the wallpaper. Sprigs of leaves and pictures of ripe olives run above our heads along the length of the wall Marten has built just inside the gallery. Normally, this is one big, wide-open space. Marten has divided it, and created a long, thin space at the entrance, where a number of white, welded and bolted steel objects that look like work stations, each cluttered with small objects, are arranged. Everything looks as if it has a purpose, or as if some kind of activity has just been interrupted. Here's a caddy for pens, made from bog rolls, and a small model of a human brain with a bit sliced off. It's a place for thinking and doing. A wooden mouse peeks out from behind a pack of Balkan Sobranie cocktail fags. And here's a loaf of bread, with a zig-zag of paper on it. The paper goes "MMM", as if it were a speech bubble. The bread (a perfect replica) would go nicely with some of those olives the wallpaper mentions.



Peanuts, 2012, by

Helen Marten

Bread. Olives. Sustenance. The body consumes, burning fuel. Art's a sort of fuel, too. A splay of flyers for an unknown pizza joint lie on the floor. Behind the over-rich photos of pepperoni-laden slices and extruded mozzarella is an image that's familiar in a different way. Good Lord! It's [Gerhard Richter's slightly blurry painting of his daughter Betty](#), morphed along with the American hot (with extra cheese). Have the Richters gone into the pizza business? I peruse the flyer. "There's an alchemist's touch in the making, a delirious obscenity in the mixing of floury dryness with liquid and creating puffy warmth, energy, a hot universe loaded with potential for animation and the erotic," Marten has written. Yum.

At least she avoids art-speak. But as soon as you think she's snagged on something

concrete, it slides away. Reading her, and looking at her art, is like being trapped in a world created by a god who has used a [John Ashbery poem](#) or [the Surrealist Manifesto](#) as an instruction manual. You have to go with it, or not go at all.

Beyond the wall, various objects stand about or lie on the floor. In the corner, a large clay amphora used as a receptacle for walking sticks. It's as daft as an elephant's foot umbrella stand. The walking sticks, twisted as barley sugar, are again steel rods, except one, with a decorative handle, which has been roughly glued together from short wooden off-cuts, such as you might find under a saw-bench. It stops you seeing things as a checklist of objects, of which there are a great many in this show.



Detail from Ways to

Inflate, 2012, by Helen Marten

There are readymade and real things here: a Swiss Army penknife, some peanuts, wooden monkeys by the [Danish designer Kay Bojesen](#), but they're all subsumed in something more complex. The monkeys dangle (there's a fair bit of dangling in this show, things hanging like unfinished sentences) from a wooden screen, a sort of loopy, jungly lattice, topped by an upturned bowl that has spilled tangles of spaghetti, or some substance that looks like spaghetti. It sounds mad, but it's a joy to look at. There's a lot more to this complex object (eight kinds of wood were used in its manufacture), as well as numerous other materials. Each of Marten's works (this one's called Possible Starch) could spark an essay. There's a lot of unpacking to be done.

Why is the show called Plank Salad? What is Mozart doing here? The questions multiply. An enlarged portrait of the composer has been silk-screened over leather and ostrich skin. Across four large panels, called Geologic Amounts of Sober Time (Mozart Drunks), the composer goes from room to room, from the table to the bed. Disconcertingly, bottles of booze hang from strings along the bottom of the frames. The bottles speak of delirium, even if Mozart will never drink again.



Detail from Geologic

Amounts of Sober Time (Mozart Drunks), part of Helen Marten's Chisenhale gallery show

I crouch on the floor to examine a few shards of glass on a plank, caught up with the sheen of the wood and the piled-up bits of broken bottle, a whisp of purplish floss nestled on the glass. Somewhere else is a scrap of plastic supermarket bag. And here's a sock, and a half-drunk Starbucks plastic beaker of iced coffee. How come the ice hasn't melted? It must be made of glass. All this stuff, all these contrived signs of the artist's passage, must mean something. A tote bag hanging from a free-standing screen; another

net bag stuffed with personal items – toothbrush, mouthwash, seashells, chicken bones.

Marten makes you want to look very closely at the things she makes and the traces she leaves. Her way of thinking, with its word salads and trap-door metaphors, is dangerously infectious. I hate the idea of artists as rising stars, because they all too often turn into next year's burned-out asteroids. But imagine what Marten might do with an asteroid. Rarely have I been so struck.

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