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CLOSE-UP

All That Is Solid

BRIAN DILLON ON HELEN MARTEN'S *PEANUTS*, 2012

Helen Marten, *Peanuts*, 2012, mixed media. Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London. Photo: Andy Keate. Opposite page: Helen Marten, *Peanuts* (details), 2012, mixed media. Installation views, Kunsthalle Zürich. Photos: Annik Wetter.

IN A COMMERCIAL for Weber's bread from the late 1960s, Linus, the stripe-shirted boy from Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strip, instructs Charlie Brown's sister, Sally, who has forgotten to bring an object to school for show-and-tell, simply to present her lunch: a peanut-butter sandwich. After all, notes Linus: "There is something interesting to be said for everything around us." And, he adds, the sandwich in question contains enough energy to run four miles. Sally triumphs at show-and-tell, then tears off toward the horizon.

Given its seemingly obvious title, it took me an unconscionably long time to associate Helen Marten's *Peanuts*, 2012, with Charlie Brown and pals, never mind to hit online on Linus's disquisition regarding the uniformly compelling nature of all things and the translatability of overrefined carbs into vim and vigor. Specifically, I had not worked out that a knotty object, a kind of line drawing rendered in metal that sat atop the piece, was in fact an enlargement of Charlie Brown's torso. I had spotted the peanuts themselves: three intact shells, nestled in a shallow, square declivity of the work's upper, slanted stratum. On a plane made of various woods and what we might call near-woods (of which more below), the zigzag motif of Charlie's sweater was rhymed in a bent strip of metal at the left and once more in what seemed to be soft leather—this last iteration draped somewhat queasily on a loaf of bread. There was another loaf to the right, on a little shelf, and in between a pair of supergleamy fake frosted doughnuts. Below, on the floor, was a sheet of beaten copper, and on it a pile of leaflets that looked like they were advertising a pizza joint; the leaflets featured a reproduction of Gerhard Richter's painting *Betty*, 1988.

Perhaps I had not grasped the comic-strip citation because, as is frequently the case with Marten's materially bristling and various work, I was so preoccupied with figuring out just what it was made of and how. Here is the list of materials from her recent show at Chisenhale Gallery in London: "solid ash, greasy orange Valchromat, sanded Formica, Sepili, Cherry, doughnuts, waxed paper, laser-cut steel, copper sheet, printed leaflets, peanuts, glued, rough sawn pine and foam packaging, metal legs." The litany is incomplete, of course: no bread. Unless the loaves were made of "solid ash" or one of those proprietary mock woods—I Can't Believe It's Not Lumber—that are composed of extremely stressed and extruded particles of actual wood, or who knows what. Among the effects of the profusion of objects in Marten's sculptural assemblages is the sense that the substances they are made of (sometimes obvious, sometimes obscure) might transmute into one another. In Marten's Linus-world, all are equally interesting, all equally digestible.

This absurd metamorphosis need not halt at the level of the things themselves—it happens equally to images, ideas, and art. The equivalence Marten canvases is an aspect of contemporary life: All things may be sublimed into immaterial data, then exchanged with everything else, a Richter painting for a pizza. You could posit Marten's alimentary impulse as an effort to find some physical purchase on the world again in an era of digital evanescence, though that seems a little too tempting: Quite aside from her recourse elsewhere to video and animation, solid things in her work seem just as likely to wink out of their proximate being and reappear as cartoons of themselves.

What else is *Peanuts*, or what might it become? On its spindly legs at the start of the Chisenhale exhibition, it looked like the support for an explanatory museum text. Or then again, a highly schematic landscape: Mediterranean, dust-hued, with a castellated ruin meeting sky or sea at the left. It's also a wide but drastically foreshortened console or lectern or desk. It's an especially sparse buffet lunch, or a kitchen worktop, with ingredients neatly picked out like the terms of an equation.

"A meal is a plotted space of action," says Marten, "a ritual, and so also a grammar." That's it: *Peanuts* is a sentence to be parsed or a pictographic conundrum asking to be solved. If Marten likes to play with her food till it morphs into alarming states of matter and meaning, it sometimes seems that the ultimate abjection (or perhaps refinement) of her mutant materials is a declension toward verbal abstraction. The title *Peanuts* denotes foodstuff, comic strip, animated version of same, but *peanuts* also means "next to nothing": an insulting return on a transaction or investment. Language in and around Marten's sculptures can be paltry or extravagant; her inventories of materials point to an absurd overreach on the part of the manufacturers and marketers of the stuff she deploys. (Consider again that list of what has gone into *Peanuts*: Sepili and Formica might be the names of neglected nymphs, and Valchromat is clearly an interplanetary despot.) But the work itself is also such a text: If sculpture is of necessity made of the stuff of the consumerist world, *Peanuts* is something like the list of ingredients on its discarded packaging.

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