

YOUR GRAVITY

KATE BECKINGHAM WORKS ALONG THE EDGE OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND SCULPTURE, CREATING WORKS THAT PLAY WITH GRAVITY & SPACE, THE MONUMENTAL & THE MUNDANE

There is a profound sense of dislocation present in Kate Beckingham's *Base Camp* installation¹. Emanating a vague but persistent longing, the suite of photographs and sculptural works are unified by a logic of yearning. *Base Camp* is a complex work that reflects on time and physicality, and Beckingham's nuanced construction of images, objects and space offers up a multiplicity of relationships that slip in and out of association as the variables of their perception change; your focus, your movement, your space.

You know that sensation, when you're drifting asleep and all of a sudden you're plummeting? The rush of relief in finding your body supported by a sturdy piece of furniture, despite your consciousness mere moments ago informing you otherwise, is an extraordinary feeling. It is the relationship between these two sensations, the panic of instability and the comfort of surety, which Beckingham skilfully manipulates to establish the carefully balanced tensions of *Base Camp*.

The suite of confident black and white photographs, tightly framed in no-nonsense pine, are punctuated by tactile sculptural forms, a series of assertive assemblages. Each exploits the symbiotic dichotomy of soft and hard; stretched netting cradles solid marble, dowel supports fabric and cord, rope ties to wood. None of these works fight gravity too much; the suspended droop of *Ring and Net* counters the casual lean of *Flag and Walking sticks*. While their forms suggest usefulness, the practical applications for any of these contraptions beyond that of being looked at in a gallery would be fraught. Interspersed throughout the *Studio Gesture* and *Hold On* images, Beckingham's feeble objects provide a poetic pace to the installation and inform the movement of a viewer through the space.

Essay by Lisa Bryan-Brown
Works by Kate Beckingham

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The images, too, hinge on dichotomy. Beckingham's five *Studio Gesture* photographs depict decisive actions by the artist's dis/embodyed hand and arm. A loop of rope hangs on an elbow, fingers grasp a climbing hold, a wrist leans firmly on a chair. These performed interactions between the (implied) body and the functional objects are also meditations on the influence of gravity - where the sculptural forms submit to its' constant force, the gestures defy it in a passive but definite resistance. Consider the ways you conquer the passive pull of gravity everyday: sitting up, standing, leaning over, reaching out. Consider the moments when gravity defeats you: crash, bang, splat. Oops, ouch.

Base Camp is Beckingham's response to a residency she completed in Iceland², simultaneously exploring both her time spent there and the time passed since. Slowly digesting her experiences within this foreign landscape from afar in her Sydney studio, she was drawn particularly to reflect upon her body's incompetence to effectively traverse the unfamiliar Icelandic environments of lava fields, volcanic craters and soft grounds near geothermal sites. Beckingham's practice widely considers

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'the status of the body in relation to the image'³, and it seems apt that *Base Camp* translates her body's negotiations with the landscape of Iceland into an installation environment which is in turn negotiated by viewers' bodies, in an appealing trinity of mediated experiences.

Her increasingly sculptural approach has steadily evolved from early photographic works that make plain their own construction, to full-blown spatial installation. *Base Camp* is undeniably a pivotal work for the future directions of the artist's playful practice⁴, though her arrival at the edge of contemporary sculpture and photomedia practices is well delineated by the course of her earlier works. These reveal an abiding interest in monumentality and historicism, a nuanced approach to materiality, space and time, and a perpetual sense of uncanny wonderment.

In particular, *Palatine Hill* (2013) signals Beckingham's intuitive approach to installation and her preoccupation with exploring the tension between the image and the object. Through the direct extension of the image plane, *Palatine Hill* bridges the conventions of space and time. The sculptural anchors transform the images into something more akin to portals, parallel universes somehow breached by our own. The modest scale of the images and their relationship to the sculptural elements



enhances the monumental and historical quality of the subject matter, one of the most ancient and mythologised sites in Rome, while the unapologetic materiality conversely undermines this aura.

Oblique references to antiquity and use of archaeological-ish imagery and forms are persistent devices in Beckingham's practice. Marble is a frequently recurring material in both her object and image-based works, loaded with its inherent connotations of grandeur and preciousness, in explicit reference to classical sculpture and architecture. Her floor-based installation *Rebuilding the Roman empire* (2014) is comprised of various small abstract assemblages, scattered poetically in a field of gallery-floor grey. Perched atop small slabs of marble, the myriad objects have an intriguing dualism, as akin to ancient relics as they are to contemporary sculpture, and borrowing freely from the vernacular of both. So how does a work like *Rebuilding the Roman empire* fit into the broad spectrum of contemporary photography? If it does at all, it is as an agitation, but within the context of Beckingham's practice this seemingly contradictory position that asserts object as image and image as object is less irreconcilable.

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Certainly Beckingham's education and early practice are deeply grounded in the photograph and the craft of image-making. Her point of departure is a material-centric methodology that views images as 'parallel universes that exist alongside our own, but are inaccessible to the body'³, an approach to image-making that in fact denies the image of its transportational fiction. In this way Beckingham uses images as a material, treating them as an object to be installed. This approach is perhaps best evidenced in *An infinite number of paths between two points* (2014), an installation⁵ of two angled shelves positioned such that the viewer cannot successfully perceive the two image-objects simultaneously. The work is resolved through the viewers' experience of their embodied engagement with the installation, performed in order to reconcile the real and unreal content; two amorphous blobs, one an imaged sculpture and the other a sculpted image. Spot the difference.

This sculptural turn in Beckingham's practice was long foregrounded in her purely image-based works by her persistent return to both





analogue and digital composite photography techniques. In *Venus* (2012), carefully captured exposure intervals allow her to compress time within the pictorial space, folding the passage of Venus into a singularly documented event. Contrastingly, in *Monument* (2013) she embraces a graphic, hyper-edited aesthetic, flattening material into image. Embracing artifice with candour, each of these works exemplifies Beckingham's sculptural approach to image-making, both reflexively flaunting their explicitly constructed nature.

To return to *Base Camp*, both literally and metaphorically, let's reflect upon Beckingham's modus operandi, the spatial installation and its embodied navigation. Her trajectory has consistently moved her towards this mode of practice, culminating in *Base Camp* and expanded upon even further in her recent installation⁶ *The Visitor* (2015). To Beckingham, an installation of objects is simply one large composite image that can be negotiated by bodies. The spatial relationships generated by the movement of these bodies are at the crux of her practice; where your experience intersects with your gravity, that is where you'll find the punchline in Beckingham's work.

NOTES

1. Kate Beckingham's *Base Camp* was exhibited by MOP Projects for Galerie pompom from September 17 to October 12, 2014
 2. Kate Beckingham completed a five week residency at SÍM (Samband Íslenskra Myndlistarmanna, The Association of Icelandic Visual Artists) in Reykjavík, Iceland, in October 2013
 3. Quote drawn from Katherine Rooke's *Interview with Kate Beckingham*, Try Hard Magazine issue 6, available at <http://tryhardmagazine.com/interview-kate-beckingham>
 4. Email correspondence with the artist, 21 March 2015
 5. Kate Beckingham's *An infinite number of paths between two points* was installed at Alaska Projects as part of the group exhibition *Negative Capability* from February 5 to 16, 2014
 6. Kate Beckingham's *The Visitor* was installed at ARCHIVE Space as part of the group exhibition *OBSERVATION/MEDIATION* (curated by Katherine Rooke) from February 11 to 28, 2015
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