Ian Kiaer: Tooth House

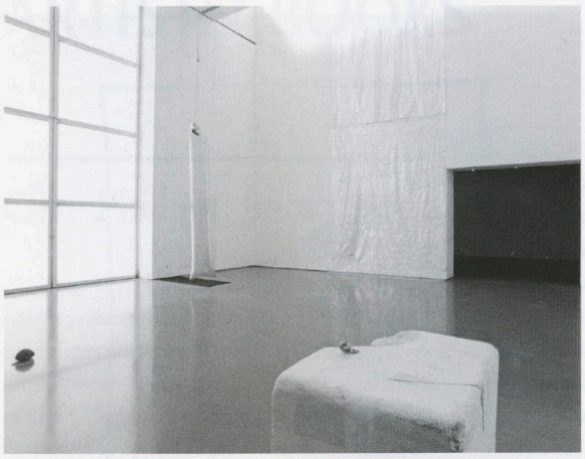
Henry Moore Institute Leeds 20 March to 22 June

Although Ian Kiaer is associated with combining flat areas of pattern and colour, often supplied ready-made by appropriated fabrics and objects recycled from the debris of his routine existence and that of nameless others, perhaps the most successful works in this exhibition are those that have undergone the most laborious aesthetic transformation.

Tooth House, floor, 2014, is a large rectangle as uniformly black, creased and insubstantial as a particularly capacious opened-out bin bag. The first work a visitor encounters on arrival in the Institute's reception lobby, the piece cast over the show ahead its parallel impressions of a makeshift covering and a deep void. It must have seemed right to the artist to reassign it to the wall where, viewed head on, the material reveals itself as not plastic or integrally coloured but as altogether finer: a large, wafer-thin sheet of tough India paper blackened with ink out of its customary white translucency.

The other work, by contrast, is a shimmering cascade of transparent plastic: *a.r. nef, sol, silver, vertical*, 2013, descends the height of the gallery's tallest room with a surface exfoliating flakes of silver leaf like an eczema of expended grandeur. Given the artist's characteristic reticence at showing his hand in terms of gesture, the work bears unmistakable traces of both handling and place. Parallel indentations of floorboards across its surface also testify to the artist's decision to change its planar orientation from a sculptural horizontal to a pictorial upright.

Both pieces exemplify the quiet spectacle of Kiaer's understated art with their mix of simplicity and absurdity, troubling brazenness and



melancholy, mute profundity and jaw-dropping finesse. Kiaer excels at shifts between scale, idiom, definition and metaphor, and by setting new work amongst a selection of projects spanning almost a decade of activity, this exhibition underlines the consistency, clarity and complexity of his purpose. Multiplying the clusters of obscure references invariably found in each of Kiaer's precisely arranged installations of austere elements, the six projects gathered here seem to reflect on Modernism's lost project: a world based on spiritual ideals rather than efficiency and logic.

Until recently, Kiaer has used the word 'project' to describe bodies of work, in preference, even, to the word 'work'. By its nature, a project is active and the term resonates with thoughts of experimenting, continuity and possibility. Possibility recognises no temporal restriction, putting time on a loop that dissolves past and present into a future moment when the work will still be evolving. This process contradicts the ephemeral nature of the chipped and abraded materials with which Kiaer articulates his compositions; it is emblematic of ideas in perpetual circulation, activated by the maker and viewer in relation to their surroundings.

The reach of Kiaer's references invariably exceeds the grasp of his audience which, in the course of this show, encountered titles citing, often obliquely, Paul Scheerbart, Alexandre Dumas and Aldo Rossi. The earliest piece, *Grey Cloth project: Glashaus*, 2005, was inspired by the thwarted aspiration of the architect Bruno Taut's prismatic glass-domed pavilion of 1914; it comprised a miniature model in cardboard and bilious yellow plastic, placed vulnerably on the gallery floor, and a watercolour of the dome's disc-like plan, mounted low on the wall behind and resembling a rising sun. The most recent installations, collectively called *Tooth House*, 2014, emerged from Kiaer's fascination with Frederick Kiesler's postwar drawings and models. Hopeful conceptual prototypes rather than pragmatic plans, Kiesler's curving biomorphic designs promoted the interaction of space, people, objects and concepts in an architecture that was infinitely adaptable to its occupants' needs. Some elements in Kiaer's projects appear to breathe, among them the big inflated ball of translucent plastic in *Erdinrindenbau project: inflatable*, 2006. As if to loosen up the Institute's geometrically precise and impersonal exhibition galleries, it is one of the first objects seen on entering the show.

Kiaer's compositions refute any notion of disposability, either physical or conceptual. The ideas gestating within each project float

on, subject to subtle mutations like the shaft of discoloured clear plastic in *Black tulip: sleep*, 2012. It resembles both a dreamtime thought-bubble and a troubling incubus from a Gothic novel. Suspended from the cable of the electric fan heater that blows air into its hollow body, this modest form flutters in agitated tumescence as the current whips it, tilting over the black, bed-like mat stretching out from the wall into the floor. Above the mat is a single, vacant brass picture hook, while in the reflective surface of the clear PVC pinned to the wall nearby, distorted reflections dance.

Kiaer's evasive, tentative probings are indicative of a course taken between conventional idioms. Instinctively, he may remain a painter, as commentators regularly insist; he projects his concerns about the deficiencies of representation beyond the picture plane to be scrutinised in the round by mobile onlookers. Yet his work seems more comfortably located in hybrid territory shaped as much by sculpture's properties of scale and material as by faith in the imagination, the broad horizon of visionary texts and the capacity of humans to store, process and retrieve their perceptions. ▮

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