

Higashino, Yuki, *Nina Canell, Future Mechanism Rag Plus Two Grams at Simian, Copenhagen, ARTFORUM, October 2024*

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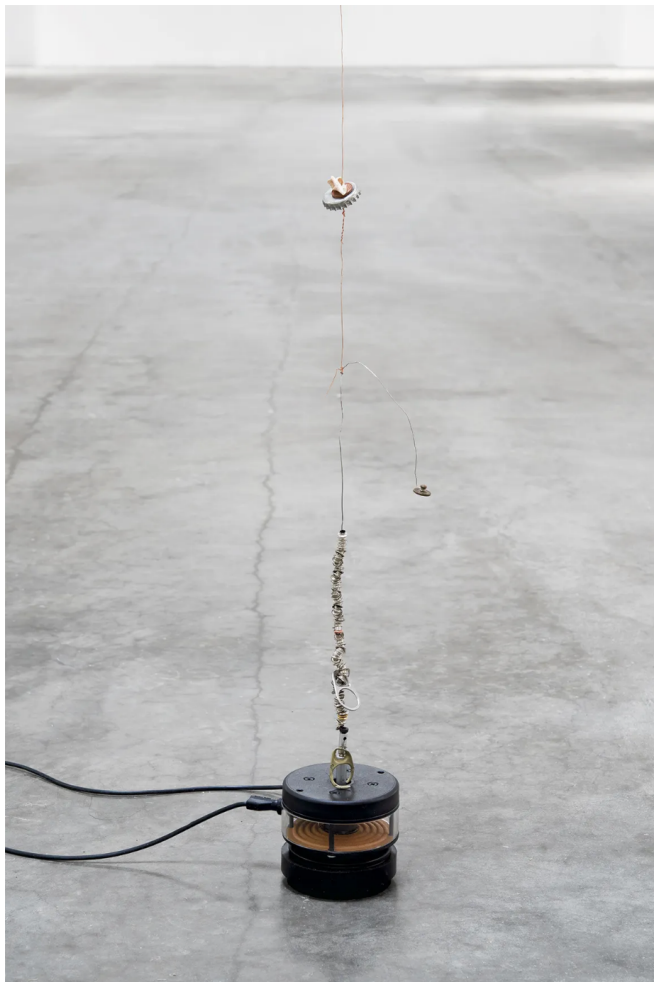


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Nina Canell

Simian

By Yuki Higashino



Nina Canell, *Future Mechanism Rag Plus Two Grams* (detail), 2020, wire, rivets, shackle, can rings, connector rings, bottle cap, coin, shell, copper, weight, vibration generator, frequency generator, cables. Installation view.

The early July day I visited Simian to see Nina Canell's show "Future Mechanism Rag Plus Two Grams" was an unusually cool one, even for Nordic summer. The gallery is housed in what used to be an underground bike parking lot and retains its industrial and impersonal architecture. Unsurprisingly, it can feel pretty cold on a chilly day. This experience, admittedly unrelated to the exhibition, left an impression on me because physical sensation is so crucial to Canell's work.

The centerpiece of the show—quite literally, as it was placed in the middle of the huge and open exhibition hall—was the film *Energy Budget, 2017–24*. Produced in collaboration with Robin Watkins, it was a single-channel video displayed on a freestanding LED wall. It shows the main body of a car on a fully automated assembly line as it is slowly carried through a chamber with large and sumptuous rotating ostrich feather dusters. The process, one learns from the exhibition text, removes dust from the car before it is painted; the feather duster is used because female ostrich feathers, each with countless barbules, produce “a negative static-electric charge that lends itself particularly well to dust collection.”

That is a curious fact. But the strength of the piece lies in its extremely seductive visuality, the sheer strangeness of seeing a perfectly machined object in an ultra high-tech production line treated with great bundles of feathers. The cinematography is flawless, and the immaculate and sterile technological space recalls Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), while the close-up of feathers, gently swaying like some kind of underwater creature, suggests the scientific films of Jean Painlevé. Indeed, the car body with its white undercoat looks like an albino crab shell. The moments of contact between the hard, cold surface and the soft and luxuriant ostrich feathers trigger a strong physical reaction in the viewer—heightened, in my case that day, by that of cold air. And there is unmistakable sexual, or at least sensual, connotation to this depiction of a hard/soft haptic interaction.

The film was accompanied—surrounded—by a group of sculptures. Each of them is made from some type of cord: Wires, strings, and shoelaces are somewhat haphazardly strung together, and all sorts of knickknacks, tape, rivets, ball chains, and so on, are attached to some of these cords. Each sculpture is stretched from the ceiling or a skylight to the floor, where it is attached to a vibration mechanism, which in turn is connected to a frequency generator. The devices make the sculptures tremble nervously at different intensities. Delicate in appearance as these works may be, they have large acoustic presence. For instance, *Future Mechanism Rag Plus Two Grams, 2020*, which gave the exhibition its title, creates a regular jangling, with odd metal pieces reverberating through the echoey space. These sculptures with relentless vibration are like bricolage Fred Sandbacks on the verge of mental breakdown.

The sound they make also acted as accompaniment to the silent film. The incongruity between the elegant, gliding movement on the screen and the incessant and tense sound of the sculptures created a second degree of disparity after the hard/soft contrast in the film. Combining sci-fi-style technological fetishism, a percussive strain in electroacoustic music, bioengineering, and the history of found-object sculptures, Canell devised a layered show that rewarded closer attention. However, it is her masterful ability to channel these various forms of information through corporeal senses—not only visual but also auditory and haptic—that made the show not only a collection of interesting facts and experiments, but also a synthesis of knowledge and perception.