

sculpture

The Geological Underbelly: A Conversation with Nina Canell



Nina Canell, who lives and works in Berlin, explores process as medium and concept, a means to reveal synergies, transferences, and entanglements while uniting immaterial forces and material form. “Scree,” her current exhibition at Mendes Wood DM in Brussels, delves into the structure of the gallery’s historic building on the Rue des Sablons, as well as the environmental past of the site. Seeing beyond finished surfaces, Canell unearths the raw materials and energies that make up walls, floors, and architectural details. As the gallery guide describes it: “Under the creaky floorboards, along patches of abandoned piping, Canell’s sculptures try to sense a room within the room, tugging at the seams of certainty.” For Canell, sculpture is more than a tangible object. Spare and poetic, her works become conduits for spatio-temporal and material transformation.

Robert Preece: How did you approach this show and context? When you are in the immediate area of Rue des Sablons, what do you “see”?

Nina Canell: I was interested in the geological underbelly of the Rue des Sablons. From the windows of the gallery, there is a striking view of the staircase of Our Blessed Lady of Sand, the church across the street, which seems to sink into the hill beneath—like a big sleeping sculpture, half-swallowed by the ground. The name of the street is itself a clear nod toward geology and the granular sediments below its foundation since sablon is French for “finely ground sand” or “silt sand.” It takes its name from what were uninhabited wetlands outside of Brussels’ first city walls in the 1300s.

RP: How did you work with the interior spaces?

NC: The rooms have a lot of character and history—the arches, and all that tamed wood. There is an interesting tension between material liveliness and material mastery. I wanted to unsettle the controlling aspects of imposed aesthetics and human craft by communicating with the materials of the room directly—with walls, floors, pipes, and hinges.

RP: Bubble Cult (2022), which is installed in a stairwell, seems to function as a symbol.

NC: I agree, and I wanted to use that presence by placing it overhead in the staircase. The shape of the arch was traced directly from the curved doorways upstairs, forging a kind of spatial echo or ripple, like rings on water—a curiously fitting movement for a staircase.

RP: What is the significance of the wooden spirit levels that you used?

NC: Bubble Cult consists of seven cut-up and reassembled spirit levels. I had been collecting wooden levels for some time, anticipating a good moment to cut one up. I had a clear feeling that they would speak with the wooden curvatures of the gallery. The ones that I used are about 100 years old (including the bubbles of air trapped inside), similar to the age of the building itself. It's such a paradoxical tool of precision. The wood bulges and bends over time under the influence of atmospheric conditions. Trees and branches are by nature non-conformist. If this work has any symbolic power, it lies in the shattering of the cult of even planes.

RP: Could you explain Silurian Slurs (2022), the work at the top of the stairwell?

NC: There are two columns in the show, each titled Silurian Slurs and made of stacked vessels for mixing concrete and mortar. They are all found objects from small construction sites, most of them with, literally, tons of experience. I have been considering how biomineralization informs and supports most of the human-constructed world, including the history of sculpture. Marble, for instance, is composed of limestone, which is, in turn, made up of fossilized shells, common in both architecture and art. The Silurian Slurs came out of a body of work that explores the marine past of concrete and the mineral tumbling that feeds the construction industry.

RP: The intervention in the doorway, Knock Knock (2022), is mysterious. What is the story behind it?

NC: It's a floorboard removed and fixed to the doorframe with a customized hinge made specially to fit into the negative space left by the removal of old hinges that once held doors. Something that really stayed with me after visiting the gallery a few years back was that every movement in the space gave way to a sound, from the creaking floorboards to the liquid murmurs of the heating system. I also noticed the ghost hinges in the doorway, which evoked the absence of a sound. Knock Knock literally and poetically leaps across the room, calling on a presence that makes itself heard rather than seen.

RP: The gap in the floor, made by the removed board, exposes an unexpected structural element. How did you find this view? Did you consider removing other boards?

NC: This was the first work to fall into place. I followed my intuition, but the fact that we found a copper pipe junction underneath is probably more telling of the building than my intuition. Infrastructure is everywhere, and I am interested in the metallurgic carriers that course through our spaces and geographies. Henri Lefebvre talks about the city as a “burning blazing bonfire,” referring to the ramification of energy that permeates the walls, floors, and grounds of our cities. The chance-based removal of a single floorboard is telling.

RP: What materials did you source to make Screee (2022)?

NC: “Screee” is the title of the exhibition, and there is a small sculpture in the show called Screee. The work is an assemblage consisting of mollusc shells from the North Sea on top of a mortar pump housing unit. Usually this would be attached to a machine that mixes aggregate and cement, in order to spray concrete onto surfaces. As such, it is a mouthpiece at the end of a violent industrial sequence in which mechanical processes grind form into formlessness. It is uncanny how the engineering of the housing itself is mollusc-like.

RP: Could you tell me about the lighted work, Soft Corner (Visitation) (2016–2022)? Are you referencing the subject from historical Christian art?

NC: Soft Corner is part of a family of works that I have made over the years, which function as small interventions, tracing a corner of the room with copper pipes and electro-luminescence. The glass tube is hand-blown and uneven, causing a slight destabilization of the corner. So the “visitation” refers to revisiting my own work, although I did consider the word especially resonant in the context of the building. I hadn’t thought about that motif in Christian art, but the Visitation is often depicted as an embrace, which is perhaps not too far off. I am very attached to corners.

RP: Hardscapes (0,023 Tonnes) and Hardscapes (0,017 Tonnes), two textured wall-works, employ crushed shells. What was the thinking behind them?

NC: They refer to “hardscaping,” elements like driveways and walkways in landscape design. Shells from marine molluscs are sold for this purpose after having been dredged from the North Sea, along with sand and other aggregates. Fossilized shell structures in limestone also provide the essential calcium carbonate structures to produce cement and concrete, inviting us to travel way back in time to find their source. Our human-built world relies on an unfathomable number of broken biomineral forms that are, in fact, another kind of fossil resource. The Hardscapes cling to the walls like rocky outcrops and are an attempt to disrupt the polished membrane of the white wall, speaking to the calcified vitality within.

RP: The presentation of “Scree” is very elegant and refined, with a lot of thought behind it. How long did it take to research, develop, and execute? Were there a lot of changes and adjustments along the way, or did you see it all straight away?

NC: This show was a long time in the making since we postponed it multiple times during the pandemic; many exhibitions and a book, Reflexologies, happened in between. It had been evolving in the back of my head for a few years, transforming many times. To keep the process alive, I withheld certain decisions, such as the removal of the floorboard. I wanted the exhibition to have a partly improvised spirit. I hope that sense of directness carries over.