

Review

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Oxytocin & Swell

Katie Caron & Martha Russo
Ice Cube Gallery and Spark Gallery, Denver, Colorado, 2012



Written by, Karen Jacobs, Associate Professor of contemporary literature and visual culture at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Through their recent biomorphic experiments with multiples in *Oxytocin* and *Swell*, Martha Russo and Katie Caron have been mapping a visual and conceptual territory that might be called somatic ecology. The two installations mix micro- and macroscopic scales in playful and arresting interpretations of organic growth, development, and interconnection. This most recent work recalls the exploration of bodily processes and systems undertaken in “Apoptosis” (exhibited at the Denver Art Museum in 2011) and its ambiguation of inside and outside, clean and unclean, organic and industrial. But these latest shows are less concerned with the abject dangers of border crossing than with interrogating methods of connection—umbilical and electrical, chemical and gestural. The shows are magical mystery tours of the body’s secret spaces and processes that slyly complicate the materialism evoked by their titles.

Oxytocin takes its name from the mammalian hormone that plays a central role in sexual reproduction, particularly during and after childbirth, as well as being involved in social recognition and bonding generally. The first of Ice Cube Gallery’s three spaces, consecrated to Russo and Caron’s collaborative installation, engages most directly with the title theme and presents five distinctively demeanored constructions roughly scaled to the size of a human body. These compositions—some, outwardly reaching lyrical growths, others, compactly self-contained systems—tether dense cascades of internally lit paper and porcelain spheres to a network of black electrical cables and industrial cable boxes. These thick skeins of cable literally connect each piece to a power source, and also serve as webs of scaffolding that aggressively embrace each family of components. Despite this, the elements appear so lightly held that they forecast their escape. Crisply geometric porcelain spheres bubble up out of larger paper-covered globes slickly glazed in silicone membranes that together evoke an explosion of cell division and mutation. Bristling circles of iron spokes, each topped with a small bubble of glaze, at once suggest medieval weaponry and neurotransmitters migrating to a docking site. Our easy proximity

to these forms facilitates their uncanny shifts in scale and affect, alternately ebullient and menacing, invitingly porous and defensively impenetrable.

Two other rooms showcasing Russo's and Caron's independent work provide windows into how their distinctive aesthetics feed their collaborations. Across two adjoining walls and ceilings Russo has anchored roughly two hundred ceramic elements to create "Shibumi," whose abstracted marine forms make this floating constellation feel simultaneously located under water. One end of the trajectory emerges out of muted clusters of bumpy slip-cast ovoids that recall sea urchins (but are actually cast from a dog-toy); the other end sprays out into delicate accordion-shaped fossils whose gradual diminution of pigment seems to reveal a hidden infrastructure of bone. A hundred seventeen individually patterned brightly colored clay slabs provide the transition between these (reversible) ends, whose slumped shapes and unique glazes read like a fantastical corral reef or Aladdin's cave. Caron's independent work consists in five larger-scale mixed media drawings on paper and five smaller paper and Masonite works, rendered in a palette dominated by black and white and accented by acid pinks, with volumetric and iridescent effects achieved with silicone and embedded reflectors. Beyond the abiding tensions staged by fusing organic forms with synthetic materials, the drawings read as thought experiments very much in the same idiom as the installation, building a vocabulary of circular shapes that recall cells, eyes, and reproductive processes through a gestural foundation of proliferating black lines. While the *conceptual* leap from Russo and Caron's two tributaries to the collaborative pieces may be small, one is unprepared for the comparative density, dimensionality, and sheer power of these sensibilities combined.

Russo and Caron's "Swell" recalibrates the largely muted and organic palette of *Oxytocin* into a rich spectrum of cool blues and purples embedded in gorgeously balanced organic compositions, the surfaces of which seem lined and mottled with experience. A subtle animation suggesting environmental eddies and flows have been projected onto Mylar flooring that reflects and distorts the sculptural forms and moves the installation into illusionistic territory. That territory gestures beyond the rhythmic pulsations of engorgement and release signaled by the show's title, although the visual rhetoric of cellular embodiment clearly informs its compositional logic. Translated by Mylar into two-dimensional reflections, the sculptural objects read as soft-edged Diebenkorns, glowing with an incandescence that evokes deep space, northern lights, and ancient, florescent underwater creatures. The Mylar is a simple device but a huge visual surprise, a game changer, not only because it creates an immersive experience for the spectator but because the projected animation transforms the piece into performative space—one that continually disorients, engages, and also reverses the viewer's perspective.

Although both artists could accurately be described as makers of layered environments, Russo and Caron bring distinctive sensibilities to a collaborative relationship now in its second year. The muted organic subtlety of *Oxytocin* recalls the palette and forms of many of Russo's other large sculptural installations, which similarly achieve intricate, dynamic surfaces through densely arranged, smaller, usually clay objects. Undoubtedly, the biomorphic imagination of these installations also owes something to Russo's background in developmental biology. The more disciplined spherical geometries as well as the bright, dramatic bursts of color and experiments with reflection, light, and animation are indebted to Caron, whose work has consistently explored theatrical effects and illusion, often in imaginary worlds realized through an engagement with electronic and other non-ceramic based media. The contrast between Russo's more muted palette and organic shapes and Caron's vivid colors and fascination with the artificial arguably produces the most productive tensions in their memorable pieces.

