

KALEIDOSCOPE

Rochelle Goldberg By Maxwell Smith-Holmes —Winter 2016



Photo credit: Corey Olsen

Petroleum arrives at the Canadian-born artist **Rochelle Goldberg**'s Brooklyn studio from a vendor that sells "West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude oil." Goldberg uses crude oil, alongside living matter such as chia seeds and snails, as part of sprawling sculptures composed of ecological and industrial materials. In her oil bucket sculptures, the stench of fossil fuels emanates from baroque vessels constructed of hands, snakeskin, and foliage, all rendered in metallic-glazed ceramic. In other works, Goldberg suspends her materials in oil slicks spread across gallery floors in a gesture that recalls both rallying cries for environmentalism and geopolitical struggle, Greenpeace and Exxon, the Alberta tar sands and the Arabian Gulf. The polysemy of crude oil points to the fact that, in Goldberg's work, objects always ooze out of their bounds in slippery pursuits of ever expanding meaning.

For her solo show "The Cannibal Actif," on view this past June at Federico Vavassori in Milan, Goldberg carpeted the gallery's upstairs with chia, in various stages of its lifecycle, as part of a dystopian ecosystem comprised of steel outlines, crude oil, anthropic ceramics, and live snails. The snails, painted by the artist, after being transplanted into the exhibition from their home atop a pile of trash outside the gallery, metabolize the skeins of chia sprouts and oil strewn across the floor, leaving a slimy residue in their track. Like the lucky citizens who emerge from their bomb shelters twenty years after Doomsday, the plants and animals that survive in "The Cannibal Actif" appear as resilient life forms that despondently persist in the aftermath of a catastrophe. Seemingly oblivious snails eat, sleep, and shit in the post-apocalyptic landscape of a gallery polluted with petroleum and haunted by the leftover fragments of biotechnic innovation run afoul. Some chia seeds are caught in a state of perpetual immaturity, having been tricked into sprouting by the wetness of oil. Elsewhere, verdant blooms stand out as ominously fecund refuges in the midst of a poisonous landscape.

Goldberg refers to these installations as “digestive networks,” seething complexes of matter and meaning that perpetually turn towards new terrains of signification. These are self-contained ecospheres that seamlessly switch between vast narratives and inquiries into the politics of perception. Likewise, Goldberg’s work is rooted in disciplines as disparate as neuropsychology and speculative terraforming. For her first institutional solo exhibition, **“The Plastic Thirsty,”** opening on January 23rd at **Sculpture Center,** New York, Goldberg mounts a site-specific installation that elaborates the themes that have motivated her previous work. For **Sculpture Center,** she has adapted the prostrate sculptures that she often exhibits in traditional gallery spaces to the **Sculpture Center’s** labyrinthine basement. **“The Plastic Thirsty”** furthers her engagements with information technology and with language: a 65-foot fiber optic highway surges with pure potentiality along one hallway while, throughout the entire exhibition, viewers are addressed by a series of magic eight balls and a sculpture of a drowning fish.

Goldberg often works with an elusive hand—in her steel tri-fold sculptures currently on view at Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York, she inverts the traditional deception of a trompe l’oeil by suggesting two-dimensional planes in the place of three-dimensional gallery space. In testing our attachments to the fantasies that we project onto things, Goldberg’s excavates the unstable ground on which the world is built.