

Old Master Products

A conversation between
Fiona Connor and Kavior Moon

Fiona Connor: Well, for some reason the location that comes up here is “Old Master Products.” That’s weird.

Kavior Moon: Very weird. Was that the name of something that used to exist on this site...

FC: I guess so. Yeah. So I guess that’s the name of this piece!

KM: Maybe we can begin with at what point you were thinking about your exhibition at SculptureCenter and your exhibition at Secession in relation to one another. Did you know what you wanted to do from the outset, or did you decide more organically? Were you invited to do one

exhibition and then at some point you realized that you wanted to install a duplicate set of objects in the other space to set up a comparative framework? How did it start?

FC: It started as a big soup of ideas while doing site visits to Long Island City and Vienna and thinking a lot about those exhibition spaces. Originally I was really interested in not putting anything in the galleries but doing permanent installations in homes around the museums. There would just be a brochure available in the museum to send you outside of it. I had a vision of these brochures that would be black-and-white photocopies, with very clear directions for how to get to the homes.

KM: And the galleries themselves would be empty.

FC: Basically, yeah, except for the brochures. There's just something about sending people out into the expanded field of the world. I felt kind of pinned down by having to make an exhibition in both of these spaces. One day I was in my studio and—I clean a lot in my studio. I probably clean more than I make work in here.

KM: Wait, why?

FC: I like the basic maintenance work of sweeping and cleaning. It's like a muscle memory dance where you're regrounding yourself. So, you know, when you get home from a trip and you unpack your suitcase. Everything has its place. For me, getting home is like cleaning the apartment and putting your stuff away. You're refamiliarizing yourself with that place. A big part of being in the studio for me is doing this maintenance work. So I was sitting there and I was like, I was just very invested in this idea of not filling the galleries with



foreign things or the like. I wanted to do something which kind of teetered on the edge of existence or was formally barely there, but activated the space, which is the psychological territory that I like my work to exist in. And I had in the corner of my studio a broom, a dolly, a stool, a pen, and a dustpan and broom. And I thought, what that's doing is exactly the zone I want one or both of these shows to be in. Those tools are objects, but they speak of this other thing which is maintenance or interaction with a room, something active and not an endpoint.

KM: I was asking in part because I can imagine other artists having a different approach, one in which they let things accumulate, so objects and surfaces become like strata or a palimpsest. It's funny—what comes to mind are actually some offices of an older generation of professors. When you go into their offices, you see this landscape of their thinking. Everything just accumulates, books, papers, dust. How you think about the speed and temporality of objects seems different. You see objects as things to be put away and stored, which means they can re-emerge. They are in flux.

FC: Or maybe it's that the work consists of an approach, as opposed to being a thing. Thinking about the work as an approach can be the most sustainable way of thinking about it.

KM: How did you choose to cast these specific types of objects?

FC : It's a big mix. The exhibition at SculptureCenter was happening before the one at Secession, and I was really thinking about how difficult that space is.

Opposite:
Fiona Connor,
*Closed for
installation*,
2019, detail,
*Closed for
installation*,
Fiona Connor,
SculptureCenter,
#4
SculptureCenter,
New York, 2019.
Bronze.
Dimensions
variable.

KM: You knew you were going to get the catacombs.

FC: Exactly. It's claustrophobic down there and I was thinking it was too difficult. When Sohrab said, well, we want you to do an exhibition in the bottom space, I was, like, oh fuck. But of course it ended up being a really great prompt, really productive. I was thinking about the space downstairs as kind of heavy with the presence of previous work that had been done there. And also the corridors are really like a maze. And so I wanted to work with both of those characteristics. So the objects that I chose are ones that I can imagine being used during the install of shows down there. A lot of them actually came from my studio. The dolly came from Sebastian at the Fowler Museum. The level was given to me by Erin and Ian Besler when they moved out of their studio. The cardboard piece came from SculptureCenter. I actually brought that

Opposite:
Fiona Connor,
Closed for
installation,
2019, detail,
#8, *Closed for*
Installation,
Sequence of
Events,
Secession,
Vienna, 2019.
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Dimensions
variable.





home with me from a site visit. Same with the paint tray. So they're kind of a mixture from the museum, from my studio and—um yeah, like that was from as.is Gallery, that folding chair. It's not referring to just a museum or a studio. It's about what is it to maintain a white cube? That's part of what the artwork is about.

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Bronze.
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KM: What about the decision to make bronze casts of these objects? Had you worked with bronze before?

FC: Mm, I had made one bronze object before, which was the bedroom door handle of Thornton Ladd, who designed the main Cal Arts building. I made his door handle in bronze and in aluminum, and lived with them. I found that I just really enjoyed living with it, the bronze one. It's a really nice metal. I think it's... heavy, durable, warm, and it's very blood-like. When it's cast, it heats up and

expands and then slightly contracts. The patina and the surface of it is so versatile and alive. It changes over its life and so, in a way, it's like an active, living thing.

KM: So even with bronze you're thinking about how it changes over time. Most people might think about bronze in terms of historical monuments, as durable and unchanging, but you're right. They do change, and it's just an illusion that they're fixed and permanent.

FC: I think that's one of the funny things that the work brings up, that they're dependent on something, like their life cycle but also on their placement. These objects are really dependent on where they sit in a room.

KM: So the placement of the objects in a space is very important to you.

FC: Totally important.

KM: They were much harder to discover in SculptureCenter, which made the experience a lot more fun. But then, that subterranean space is just so odd.

FC: Exactly. I think the installation at Sculpture Center was more powerful for that reason because it was really teetering on the edge of visibility, but then the objects were so major and radiant because they're bronze. It was a really great chemistry.

KM: One of the things that you mentioned in an E-flux podcast is how there's a kind of universality in terms of these objects being used all over the world in contemporary art spaces. But different countries have different cultural understandings and histories of work. Did you get a sense of that?

Such as when you were talking to the people who were helping you at these institutions? In the way that, let's say, I don't know, shaped the number of hours that they worked or how they took their lunch breaks...

FC: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

KM: How did that actually, or did that manifest in some ways for you?

FC: So that's really interesting. I was anticipating that this work would bring up differences in attitudes towards labor, but it actually brought up differences in attitudes towards art. I sometimes have these illusions that the work is talking about non-art ideas, but then I realize that they mostly orbit around different expectations of art and the way that objects are experienced.

KM: How do you feel about that?

FC: I think it's sort of, like, "oh my gosh, I wish I had been attentive to this," but also going, "of course"! It's about trying to talk about very essential things, very abstract things, like time, existence, perception, do you know what I mean? The tools become a symbol of things that often get edited out, that represent back of the house activity. Letting them bleed into the main event and rendering them in a significant material changes their status. These tools seem to become more immortal than the viewer. And that is a weird proposal.

KM: I think so. And it becomes more meta in a way. It's about the representation of the thing, and the referent can be something that exists outside of art, such as the ordinary workings of everyday life.

FC: Yes.

KM: At the same time, maybe it's a matter of constructing a bridge between the two discourses or realms of activity and experience. The people who were helping you out, let's say the art handlers, how did they respond?

FC: Some of the sweetest feedback was from people who work in the industry. It was like a revelation of recognition, this is my work, this is my life. There is a sense of gravitas to the bronze. In Vienna, the install crew took such joy in it. They got it instantly. And that's not to say that they didn't get it in those abstract terms. They really got those essential abstract ideas because they're so used to touching these things.

KM: How we think about value derives in significant part from the choice of material used. Here, it's bronze. There is a long history and tradition of using bronze for commemoration, for memorials.

FC: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

KM: But with your objects, instead of a monumental work of architecture or a monumental figure, whether political, mythological, or religious, you have something that is anonymous, that represents the anonymity of working class labor. It's a particular type of labor.

FC: Yes. I think that's a good word to use. The object suggests the worker, but the worker is a different figure in different cultures. And, in a way, all I can really speak to is my own autobiographical experience, which is that I really enjoy doing that kind of stuff.



Above:
Fiona Connor,
*Closed for
installation*,
2019, detail,
#8, *Closed for
Installation*,
*Sequence of
Events*,
Secession,
Vienna, 2019.
Bronze.
Dimensions
variable.

KM: Making things? Working?

FC: Maintenance work. But I can't, I dunno. I get into tricky territory. It goes back to art again, about who the artist is in an artwork. Often you try to assert yourself as an artist, but in this case the figure who's doing the work is kind of erased. I think that becomes an interesting tension, one between the worker figure that we have in our minds when we see these things and the artist figure. I think that's the tension I'm interested in, as opposed to defining what a worker is.

KM: Do you think that tension comes in part from the fact that they tend not to be equally recognized in the end result or the exhibition that one sees?

FC: Do you mean the artist and the worker?



KM: Yes. On the one hand, the artist is a worker. The workers, however, are not artists in an authored way, but they are direct participants in the production of the artwork. There seems to be an inequality there, right? At least with respect to visibility and recognition? With art, we're trained to think about the end result as authored, so there's a name, which is the artist's name. All of the other work that goes into making it becomes invisible, abstracted or what Marx would call alienated labor.

FC: So I guess I want to question the assumptions about what an artist worker is and what a paid by the hour worker is, to have this work rub up those assumptions together and find commonalities.

KM: As well as differences?

FC: Exactly. Yeah. Just want to make sure we're still recording "Old Master Products."

KM: Um, well, these bronze objects feel like "old master products"!

FC: I know. It's totally weird, isn't it?

KM: Let's turn to talking about boundaries, playing with delineations of site, which is something that you're doing in these exhibitions, though perhaps it's not immediately apparent. You have to do a bit of searching and investigating because in addition to the exhibitions at SculptureCenter and Secession, there are also works of yours done outside of the museums.

FC: Yeah. For some time, I've been interested in the home as a site for experiencing work and living with work. I've been trying to get my head around how to make that realm or that idea as pertinent

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Dimensions
variable.



and discussed and relevant as what goes on in the gallery space. Alongside the Closed for Installation bronze installations, there was a series of works called A Sequence of Events, which was spread over ten homes. They were mostly permanent installations. The idea was to see if I did works in artist-run spaces, museums, and people's homes, could these sites be made relative to one another and these works be seen as each perfectly singular and unique and important regardless of what institution they are attached to? To propose the equal importance of all places, of all homes.

KM: You were also thinking about the different temporalities of the works, right? There's a great contrast between the relatively short life span of an exhibition and these permanent works in people's homes. Or maybe they are almost permanent works, or hopefully permanent?

FC: Mostly hopefully permanent? But I think I am still figuring this out. The SculptureCenter piece, which is the annual cleaning of the windows at an apartment, I think, is successful. People don't necessarily need to visit it. They just need to know about it. You just need to get a whiff of that project and something about it transmits. I really wanted for the works in A Sequence of Events to be as talked about and as significant as the things that happened in the galleries. But there's this natural marginalization that happens when you do things in homes. And I think we all know what that is, what that feels like. Like when I say, "Oh I did a part of the show in a house" and we know why it's not as important as the thing in the gallery. Why is that? Well, it's not playing the power game that a gallery plays. It's not just the fact that a gallery is a white cube. It's the fact that the gallery is a specific institution that has a history and stands for a particular type of culture making.

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KM: Do you think it also has to do with publicness, that the gallery is a kind of public space?

FC: Right. And it's accountable to a public.

KM: There's also been much said about the hierarchy between the private and the public, in terms of what gets recognized and is valued, how the two spaces have been gendered historically.

FC: Right. I have this hope that there has been a disruption to that because of the way that we're experiencing information now, that with the huge accessibility of information produced by things like the Internet, that maybe the private could be public. What was your experience of going to see the board in Vienna? Going to see #8 [in A Sequence of Events]?

KM: Oh, you mean your work in the Karl Marx Hof?

FC: Yeah. Yeah.

KM: I didn't realize that you didn't know the person who was living in that apartment! Part of the process of trying to wrap my head around your work is figuring out what spaces you're activating. So there's the site of the museum, but there are also these ancillary sites, which in this case are domestic spaces, and there's also how these spaces exist in relation to one another within a city, and then the city itself as a site. In Vienna, you're highlighting a certain aspect of the city's history by drawing attention to the Karl Marx Hof, built as a workers' housing complex and is in fact the largest housing development in the world. Another type of space that your work activates is a social one, an expanded network or site made up of your social relationships as well as the people you worked with

SculptureCenter

Rider to Lease

46-46 Vernon Boulevard, Floor 3
Long Island City, NY 11101

Fiona Connor, #4, 2019—ongoing

- 1) SculptureCenter, a non-profit arts organization located at 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, NY, 11101, will annually hire a professional company, licensed and insured in the State of New York, to clean the windows of 46-46 Vernon Boulevard, Floor 3, Long Island City, NY 11101.
- 2) SculptureCenter will hire the professional company in collaboration with Fiona Connor, an artist who resides in Los Angeles, CA.
- 3) Tenant will accommodate the annual cleaning of their unit's windows.
- 4) Fiona Connor will contact Tenant on or before May 1st each year to schedule the cleaning according to the Tenant's availability.
- 5) SculptureCenter will pay for the window cleaning in full, and Tenant will not be responsible for any payment.
- 6) SculptureCenter will hire a professional company licensed and insured to perform window cleaning in the State of New York. The professional company will be responsible for any damage that may occur while performing its services.
- 7) While this arrangement is expected to continue indefinitely, the terms of this Rider can be terminated by any party at any time if, for any reason, either party does not wish to continue. At this point the annual cleaning shall cease.

Date:

5/20/19

Landlord:

Matt Quigley
Plastic Canvas, Inc.

Date:

5/18/19

Tenant(s):

J. Connor

Date:

5/20/19

SculptureCenter:

S. Connor

Date:

5/29/19

Fiona Connor:

F. Connor

44-19 Purves Street
Long Island City, NY 11101
+1 718 361 1750
sculpture-center.org

at the institutions and their friends. The person who was living in the Karl Marx Hof was, I think, a friend of one of the curators at Secession?

FC: Actually it was a friend of the brother of an architect that I met here in LA.

KM: Oh, okay! Despite, or maybe because of, these few degrees of separation, she seemed to have a similar kind of spirit as yours, a warm spirit of hospitality. One of the first things she did after welcoming me into her living space was to ask, would you like a cup of tea? And then she brewed me a cup of herbal tea. And it was just so lovely. We were drinking tea, standing side by side, and talking about your work, talking a little bit about you. She talked about how she happened to get involved in this exhibition, people coming by to see your work, because her temporary living space—she rents it—was the site of one of your works in the exhibition.

FC: Um that's rad. It's just so good. I need to, maybe I need to collect stories about these works. I feel like this book needs to happen in five years.

KM: Yeah. It was also nice because, you know, she's from Vienna and so she was talking about those things that were on the bulletin board. The biggest piece of paper, I think, was part of a mayoral campaign—

FC: The Social Democratic Party mayoral campaign—

KM: Yeah, and she remembered seeing those posters around the city and so had a living connection to the most prominent thing on the billboard. She also told me where I could find other



Above:
Fiona Connor,
#8, 2019,
installation view,
#8, *Closed for
Installation,
Sequence of
Events*,
Vienna, 2019,
Custom
bulletin board,
silkscreen
and UV print
on aluminum
plates, paint.
45 x 67 inches.

examples of those, that type of notice board. So after I left her apartment, I walked around and I saw a number of them at the different entrance portals to the central courtyards. There were a lot of them, since it's such a huge building.

FC: So cool. Oh, it's really rad that you went, I mean, you're totally one of the few people who saw both shows. I'm excited to exhibit the collection of bronze objects in *Closed for Installation* again. I like that it is this kit of objects that could be installed in so many different ways. It is a totally different way of thinking about site for me.