

# frieze

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## Mining for Gold

MONOGRAPH

Lucy Skaer's drawings, films and sculptures transform images of prisons, dictionaries, museums and whales into maverick meditations on senselessness and beauty



In Egyptian and Greek mythology the Sphinx – whose name derives from the Greek for ‘to strangle’ – poses passers-by a riddle and devours them if they fail to solve it. In the Greek version Oedipus is the first to answer the Sphinx’s question correctly; incensed, she lumbers away and kills herself by jumping off the Acropolis. The story can be taken as a paradigm for art work that cloaks itself in mystery or poses riddles: once you solve the question or ‘get’ the painting, the work destroys itself, in that it ceases to hold you. Ah, it’s a rabbit, and a duck, and you move on.

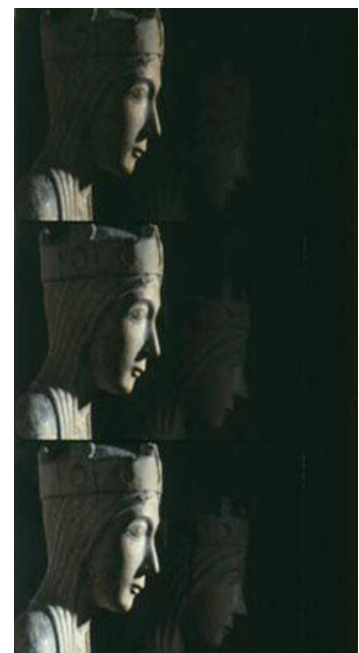
The British artist Lucy Skaer works between these two poles of mystery and decipherment with a practice that includes drawing, sculpture, film and a number of collaborations. One of the most interesting aspects of her work – which seems to exist out of time, as though it could have been made today or 20, 30, 40 years ago – is the strategies with which it defeats resolution. Skaer takes found images – often of violence, punishment and vague menace – and transforms them into restrained, elusive works. Photographs of prison cells become pleasant drawings made of thin stripes of alternating colour. A rough wooden beam from Peterhouse College, Cambridge, is carved into smooth, ammunition-like spheres. The profile of students from a photograph of the Kent State University protests in 1974 provides the shape for a wooden wheel, which is exhibited broken in half on the gallery floor. What she makes the second incarnation into, or how she re-presents the appropriated material, appears arbitrary, or at best tenuously connected to the original.

Skaer, who is based in Glasgow but currently on a year-long residency in Basel, often cites the notion of ‘irrationality’ as being crucial to her practice: ‘I’m playing with the viability of interpretation, to see if the work itself can become more maverick. I want to create objects that are less cohesive, where the links between them are stretched to the point of near collapse. Now I wonder about making sense at all.’



One of her strategies for checking interpretation is to make her work excessively charming, almost to the point of being decorative. Drawings are done in pretty shades of yellow, red and blue, or in gold leaf, and depictions such as *Wood and Trees* (2005) appear as lovely but undistinguished sketches. Her vocabulary is quaint and outmoded, and her material slightly decadent. The pieces seem to offer up, regardless of their source, nothing but an adorned illusion. In so doing, her work highlights the way in which beauty and craft are often seen to block significance or to render work illegible, and a dynamic between pure formalism and explicable meaning runs through her practice. The film included in the installation *The Siege (In Oak and Pearl)* (2007), shows a man sanding down and carving a wooden beam found in a skip outside the Cambridge college where Skaer's father studied. He carves and sands the wood into small, golf-ball-sized spheres, the tops of which are then inlaid with circles of mother-of-pearl. What they are meant to represent is left unexplained, as though their prettification were enough reason for the laborious process depicted on screen. In the exhibition space they sat next to the remainder of the rough beam like beautifully appointed dunces – children who had been taken away and scrubbed up and who now sat forlornly in their party clothes.

Skaer's appropriations tend to be taken from serious, information-heavy sources, which suggests a contrast to their new, revamped incarnations. One group of drawings was inspired by illustrations from scientific dictionaries, and another from war photo-reportage, while a 2006 film looked at ethnological artefacts in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (made with frequent collaborator Rosalind Nashashibi). To make a drawing series based on prison cells ('Cells', 2005) Skaer found images on the Internet from the Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania, reportedly the first prison in the world to be constructed according to a Panopticon design in 1829 – or, as its Wikipedia entry puts it, 'the world's first true penitentiary'. Open-faced cells line long corridors, allowing prisoners to be under constant surveillance; the kind of jail depicted in almost every modern prison film, from *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) to *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). Skaer developed a formula by which she rendered light spaces in the original photograph into green and red stripes in her drawing, and dark spaces into stripes of blue and yellow. While in such movies rebellion is usually signalled by a camera movement or angle that cuts against the horizontal and vertical planes of the prison, Skaer's transformations, by contrast, fixate on and assiduously embellish precisely these geometric parameters, as though they were in league



with them. At certain points she breaks her own rules – narrowing the uniform 3 mm space between the stripes to 2 mm, for example, or altering the pattern of stripes from red-green-red to red-red-green. The slip-ups parody the excessive rationality of Skaer's own generative rules – just as these rules parody the penitentiary's excessive rigidity. More importantly, they disrupt the illusion of space given by the drawings, making the bars of the prison a softly coloured visual pattern and drawing out an elegance in the very architecture that epitomizes punishment.

Skaer emphasizes this link between beauty and cruelty, as with the martial pyramid arrangement of *The Siege's* wood and mother-of-pearl balls, and her work often has the feel of ruthlessness. Her treatment of the elderly Surrealist painter Leonora Carrington surrounds the artist with perhaps unwarranted barbs. A one-minute silent film (*The Joker*, 2006) studies Carrington's wrinkled hands and dry, witchy hair, her jars of paint pigment kept inside a glass cabinet and her cheap plastic clothes-pegs on a laundry line – never letting Carrington, who appears to be speaking throughout, be heard. At the end of the film Carrington holds up her finger in a gesture of imminent wisdom; Skaer cuts to black. Showing it at an exhibition at the Elisabeth Kaufmann gallery in Zurich in 2006, Skaer accompanied the film with the sculpture *Leonora (The Tyrant)* (2006), a table into which she inlaid the shape of claw-like hands in mother-of-pearl (recalling the film's signature image of Carrington's wizened hands). Like Skaer's use of gold leaf in her drawings, Leonora's opulent material and its title evoke violence and threat: the hard-edged, sinister beauty that Skaer also draws out in the lines of Carrington's face and in her vainly kept long hair.



Though all her work is executed with a sure hand, Skaer's inquiries into exquisiteness and the blocking of meaning at times leave the viewer dissatisfied. The gold-leaf drawings look beautiful yet stop there, and even when they take as their subject why this arrest should be provocative – why decoration is inimical to substance – don't quite seem enough. Skaer's pieces work best when they capitalize on the nature of the encounter prompted by

defamiliarization, the literal gap between the viewer's observation and their comprehension – the pause in which Oedipus mulls over the riddle. That the Sphinx will self-destruct is Skaer's risk, and one she courts alongside the risk of seeming too flimsy. With this in mind, I think Skaer's installation at the Venice Biennale is her best to date, as it largely eschewed beauty for menace and then drew out a more complex and interesting affect from within that darkness.

In *Pith and Kernel* (2007) at the Scottish Pavilion, Skaer showed two wall-scale, obsessively marked scrolls, in black and dark grey, that represented, barely recognizably, the great wave of Hokusai's woodcut and, in a separate room, the dim outline of a toothy whale. The spiralled markings left off part-way near the end of the scroll, as though she had not had time to finish making the work. The markings drew viewers in, and they moved along the wall at a close distance, similar to the way tourists engage with the Vietnam memorial in Washington DC. The numerous scribbles suggested the drawing as a testament to human labour, and the low-key medium coded the work as intimate despite its large scale. It was only from a distance that *Pith and Kernel* showed itself to be the opposite: a depiction of the Sublime, a re-creation of the feeling, as Skaer has said, 'of the whale moving beneath you'. This directive to shift registers, in contradiction to clues given by the work, made the installation an ugly thing, something that had fooled the spectator in its intentions, and which would best him time and again without being vanquished itself. The pretty, cruel work she makes is secondary to this irresolution, which is Skaer's highest achievement.

**Melissa Gronlund**