

Don't Flinch: B. Ingrid Olson Brit Barton

B. Ingrid Olson's three solo exhibitions that opened simultaneously in summer 2022—*Elastic X* at Secession, Vienna; *History Mother* and *Little Sister* at Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, Cambridge—oozed into one another, calling into question site-specificity while using the self as reference against modernist myths. As the installations beckoned one another and beyond, the artist acted on an archival impulse to suggest that what has been made is never quite finished.

B. Ingrid Olson's first solo exhibition took place in 2013, in the midst of what is to date the coldest winter in Chicago's history. Nearly ten years later, even on an impossibly hot day in Vienna in June 2022, I still recognized those stabbingly frigid temperatures when I saw the artist contorting her posture and positions in order to fit inside, yet expand out of, the picture plane. For all of the disorienting gestures that she's worked with throughout her practice—using mirrors and their shards, or a camera's flash, or collaging with other pictures and sometimes objects—her images pursue a consistent and cold inquiry within the confines of the self as an aesthetic register. Olson's work, fundamentally sculptural even when photographic, has always been a compelling formalist struggle that sets the illusion of feminine embodiment and fragmentation against the intense and sterile sensations of confinement.

In pursuit of form and bodily experience, her new work approaches the idea of interiority as the subject that's subverted and projected onto the audience, veering away from the artist's portrayal of herself and into the commonality of the corporeal and the architectural. At Secession, *Elastic X* was a splay of liminal moments—a study of dissection that sought to stretch (as the title implies) the metaphor of the body as a room that we all occupy. Quotidian materials like wool, latex, epoxy resin, and plastic were incorporated into intimately sized ceramic sculptures that pointed to a separate and distant other. *Architect's Mouth* (2022), for instance, recalls a body simply as an object and, despite its modest size, was hung confrontingly at the viewer's navel. Given that the work mentions an unknown architect and exaggerates the underside of a tongue in motion, we realize that we ourselves may be occupying the place of a dentist or a doctor. At what other point does one ever see a tongue this way? We become inherently imbued with a gaze of stature, an expert who is positioned to determine the health or sanity of the disembodied object floating on the wall. The Carpenter Center solo shows *History Mother* and *Little Sister* are two concurrent installations on separate floors inside the landmark Le Corbusier building on Harvard's campus. In both, large sculptural works and architectural interventions treat the pseudo-sacredness of Le Corbusier's singular construction as just another subject to mine for reference. The two shows are bookends in a sense, as *History Mother* broadly renegotiates Olson's past work, while *Little Sister* addresses a literal approach to the spatial analysis that was previously only suggested via formal and poetic devices.

Proto Coda, Index (2016–22) is a partially enclosed, intimate nook showcasing Olson's past sculptural pieces mimicking body parts via reduced, minimalist forms. While *Projection, Body Parsed* (2018), or *If taken turning, endless house* (2017) exist here via suggestion and replication, the cosmos they create alongside the thirty other parts that make up the installation is a prime example of the artist's alchemical formula: body parts taken apart, reduced, and reorganized. These works, as they've grown in number over the years, have always had a bittersweet sentimentality for me, nodding as they do to drawings by the late Chicago Imagist artist Christina Ramberg. Olson's fascination with architecture as a touchpoint for the body, modernity, or institutional critique is her own, but Ramberg's use of the plane and framing as a device of feminine constriction is perfectly reorchestrated in Olson's work.

Similarly, throughout *Little Sister*, Olson's first use of architectural interventions is equally clever. In the installation *What I would be if I wasn't what I am* (n.d.), attached and hanging light works replace the original Le Corbusier fixtures. Like *Proto Coda, Index*, the objects are not entirely enclosed, allowing the exposed bulbs to present themselves in full while being encased in amorphous figures, simultaneously recalling ominous medical devices, seashells, or glowing wombs. They're certainly odd and ferocious, yet fragile looking against the weathered elegance of Le Corbusier's cement, but they're comfortable for those who readily recall congruent shapes at the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries at the Art Institute of Chicago. While they may act as a self-referential joke or a dig at the modernist male genius myth, they also suggest an analysis of today's labor and union politics, specifically the role of the artist and the worker within cultural institutions set against the storied Ivy League campus.

Keeping in mind the simplicity and quiet yet radical defiance within Olson's oeuvre, further gestures surface in *Little Sister*, like *White Wall, painted for Gray* (2022) that act as harbingers of overdue feminist analysis. The painted wall, itself a hostile act against the historic and highly specific building protocols, cites Eileen Gray, an architect and designer who was left out of the modernist canon until only recently. Unlike other works where the word "architect" is mentioned, Gray exists in the title and as a direct action against, and despite, the heavy weight of modernism.

The intersection of site-specificity, the historical, and the referential is, for B. Ingrid Olson, a fraction of her oscillating practice that considers the role of the image entirely. The photographic, as a concept that pertains to sight, multiplicity, reflection, and refraction, is an essential element in the artist's paradigm and process. Out of that comes sculpture as a separate but equal part of her work, where the inevitable and questionable dichotomy of art and architectural object (that is, the question of utility in the built environment) is further considered and moves beyond the individual gaze and into objective, bodily experience.

207 B. Ingrid Olson, *Swans Juliet*, 2020–22, *Elastic X* installation view at Secession, Vienna, 2022.

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208 209 B. Ingrid Olson, *Proto Coda, Index* (detail), 2016–22, *History Mother* installation view at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, Cambridge, 2022. © B. Ingrid Olson.

Courtesy: the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik. Photo: Julia Featheringill

210 B. Ingrid Olson, *Architect's Mouth*, 2022. © B. Ingrid Olson. Courtesy: the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik. Photo: pascal.petignat, Vienna

211 B. Ingrid Olson, *What I would be if I wasn't what I am*, n.d., *Little Sister* installation view at the Carpenter

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