

KARIN SANDER
LUCRECIA MARTEL
PAUL MAHEKE
BARBARA HAMMER

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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who is cropped out of the image, leaving only her bronze-hued taffeta skirt buffering in her wake. Hovering over the child is a solemn man in a long black coat. His bowed head is flushed a cinnamon shade, and his fingers hang over the boy's hat as if he were choosing a pastry from a bakery window. And yet whether the man's intentions are sinister remains unclear. Perhaps he is only trying to help?

Escalation, 2017, on the other hand, leaves little doubt as to where the blame lies, in its brutal portrayal of a tiny broken body, bared from the waist down. The child's legs are pulled in close, its hips and anus marred with a muddled maroon. Above the body, a bald, amphibian-eyed man thrusts his toothless jaw forward in mournful supplication, offering up two sets of clasped rheumatic hands. In *Gutted*, 2016, a bloated adult body is seen in repose, all in white with gray boots. Once more, the head is out of the frame, but an elephantine index finger trails possessively along the forearm of a young boy, sitting upright in the middle of a bed. His teal face sprouts woozily from his turtleneck—his only visible item of clothing—but his expression remains horrifically vacant. The boy's knees are burnished a curdled pink, to echo both the area around his mouth and the clouds ejaculating from the smokestack outside the window.

As raw as these images are, the show's heart-stopper was probably the painting after which it was titled. *Letdown*, 2017, depicts a young mother, naked and nearly doubled over as she struggles through murky shin-high sludge. Her stony cerulean arms are thrust upward in prayer or possibly restraint, as a crimson-faced infant presses its mottled pink mass against her back, one chubby arm reaching forward to grab her tear. The woman's battered elbows and knees speak to a repeated failing (or at least a falling), a terrible powerlessness to help her infant, reflecting the observer's own powerlessness before such spectacles of distress.

—Kate Sutton

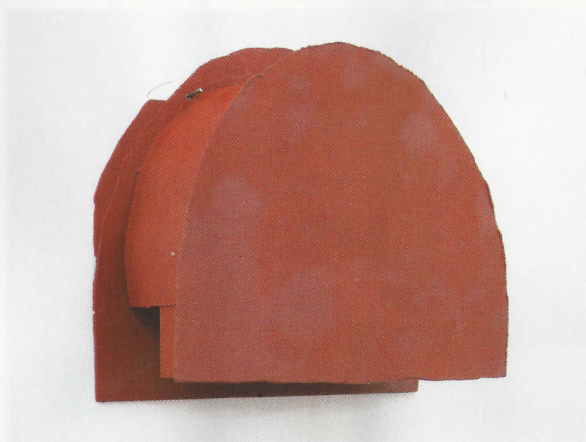
VIENNA

Liesl Raff

SOPHIE TAPPEINER

The works in Liesl Raff's recent show "Maximal Soft" promised to transform and mollify the unfeeling hardness of the materials of heavy industry. Typically, this meant making them anthropomorphic: The two large almond-shaped steel-plate tables at the front of the room, for example, titled *Eyes 1* and *Eyes 2*, both 2018, had steel irises mounted on a lazy Susan, and on their rims were rows of slag, dripping plasma-cut tears of steel. Similarly, three wall-hung pieces, *Head 1–3*, all 2017, were constructed from bent and unevenly cut sheet steel. Their anthropomorphic appeal was underlined by their hanging at eye level; in place of actual heads and faces, however, they possessed oval or semicircular flat steel surfaces, made to appear softer through the addition of an oily silicone "makeup." While the "softness" of these anthropomorphic objects was mostly metaphorical, actual material softness was introduced to the show by three sculptures, *Twist 1* and *2* and *Hanging*, all 2017, that featured colored latex ribbons dangling from wall-mounted steel elements.

Throughout the show, Raff's sculptures were strongest when her techniques and surface treatments, rather than metaphors indicated by way of the works' titles or even their forms, invoked semantic potentials not commonly associated with her materials—as evoked, for example, by peculiar objects made of modified industrial steel sheets. The artist's handcrafted modifications, and in particular their amateurish execution—exemplified by the uneven edges of the *Eyes* and *Head* pieces, or the encrusted proliferations of epoxy on the bases of *Twist 1* and *2*—supplanted the "hard" industrial origin of the materials with the artist's soft meanderings and stochastic reworkings. Producing a similar effect, the latex ribbons in the *Twist* and *Hanging* pieces displayed the signs



Liesl Raff, *Head 3*, 2017, sheet steel, paint, silicone oil, 11 1/2 x 14 x 4 1/2".

of an imperfect casting process. Such "accidents" serve to infuse Raff's sculptures with an immediacy that is almost a kind of intimacy.

This is where the show actually reached "maximal soft." But if the "Eyes" pieces implied that softness was about materials being emotional or having feelings, the smudgy layer of wax showing the artist's gestural manipulation of the surface exposed the limits of that idea. The artist's physical engagement, according to the press release, was aimed at "turning industrial materials into things with emotional lives of their own." If this sounds sentimental, that's because it is. There is a fine line between the claim that objects have agency and the idea that they have feelings. The latter might well be understood as fetishization, the projection of human qualities such as emotions onto the products of labor. Maybe that's a step beyond the maximal into the impossible, or maybe, as in a saying often mistakenly attributed to Lenin, "promises are like pie crusts, made to be broken."

—David Misteli

PRAGUE

Srác Sam

PRAGUE CITY GALLERY, COLLOREDO-MANSFELD PALACE

In Eastern Bloc countries, socially engaged art has long meant something different from what it means in the West. Under Communist Party rule, such art had to conform to strict guidelines: Artistic autonomy, individualism, and the exercise of the imagination were all considered dangerous. It is for this reason that, when the Soviet empire collapsed in 1989, most artists turned to art that foregrounded subjective expression. They only became aware of their social responsibility later.

The artist Srác Sam has faced this responsibility for many years now. Far from the bustle of Prague, she runs Galerie Sam83 in the small provincial town of Česká Bříza, Czech Republic, where she shows the work of both unknown and established artists. She also writes books, runs guest studios, looks after abandoned and handicapped children in her own home, and edits the magazine *PIŽMO*, which aims to contribute to a wider cultural diversity. She still finds time to make art.

Fear is a theme Sam repeatedly returns to, especially in her texts, which are based on her own early experiences within a Communist political system. She chose the name "Sam" because it does not immediately identify her as a woman, and in Czech "Srác" is a vulgar term that describes someone who gets so scared they soil their pants (her name translates to "Chicken Shit Sam"). For her recent exhibition in Prague City Gallery,