

Nina Canell makes sculptural objects with odd connections and entanglements, a kind of art that might be described as a form of modern alchemy, for much of it is about transformation and a search for deeper, more unified, beauty. Her experimental artistic practice is characterised by poetry, whimsy, and humour, but most of all it is about trying to imagine and articulate what is commonly beyond our sight.

Although often placed squarely in the context of minimal sculpture, Nina Canell's work contains echoes and reflections of other, more distant, sources. Yves Klein's crackpot science, for example, with its mix of pantomime and high seriousness, is a precursor; Canell would be sympathetic to his declared interest in 'what exists beyond our being yet belongs always to us', as well as to his belief that ideas are owned and shared by all. She might also share Klein's wish to make art in order to bound, in a single prodigious leap, from the mundane problems of human existence into a more sublime and immaterial form of reality.

And then, of course, there is Duchamp. Many of the concepts that he explored were invisible and obscure, tied to the end of determinist physics and the early 20th century breakdown

of the Enlightenment assumption that the world is fundamentally knowable. Modern physics had begun to question the existence of a rational, predictable world, and Duchamp created fictional quasi-scientific systems that were based on investigations of non-Euclidean geometries, concepts of four-dimensional space, work done on X-rays, radiation, and electromagnetism. Inspired by the eccentric writer Alfred Jarry, he often called them 'pataphysical'.



The work in this exhibition is about air, its stuff and substance, as well as all that moves in it, such as waves, particles, sounds, and seeds. At its heart is a sealed jar containing, we are told, 3,800 ml of air from the St. Petersburg study of Dmitri Mendeleev, the Russian chemist who discovered a way of classifying the elements after drifting into a reverie at his desk. It is a work that plays, poetically and enigmatically, with the idea that inspiration and the substance of our atmosphere may, perhaps, be indivisible.

Nonetheless, Nina Canell's art is pragmatic and physical; often sparked into life by the process of making, it can also be serendipitous. One piece in the show came into being after she

spent some time idly and rhythmically spitting out watermelon seeds; other works developed of their own accord once physical processes were set in motion: the colour of copper pipes changed after heat was applied to them, glass was bent and shaped by flame. As a rule, Canell subjects material things to elusive or capricious operations that change or affect them; sometimes they remain separate but entangled, and just as often they dissolve into one other. Not infrequently these creations are juxtaposed with old, occasionally ancient, natural objects.



Scented and diffused, drifting clouds of incense are curiously soothing and evocative. The Chinese have always valued it in much the same way as they have appreciated tea and wine; as long ago as the Han dynasty, when their empire stretched far into the west, incense was brought back for use in the court and the homes of the rich. In later years, it came to be associated with high-minded reclusive scholars who used it to refresh the air and clear their minds. One poet, for instance, wrote about burning incense in an empty room when the full moon is shining, with the green distant hills in full sight, and the half-visible smoke

from the remaining embers of the fire floating around the door screen. What could be more pleasantly pungent than that?

But incense, described flatly, is nothing but a form of smoke; in other words, it is an accumulation of tiny solid particles that are ‘entrained’, or entrapped, in a quantity of air. Smoke is simply the by-product of particular physical processes; it is extraordinary but nevertheless mundane when viewed from that perspective, and despite a certain beauty, smoke is not in itself poetic. How is it then, when scented, that it can come to seem so? Does its charm lie in projections of thought or in our physical experience? Nina Canell would probably encourage us not to make a distinction between them; like her art, they are inextricably entangled.

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