

## Nina Canell

### Cubitt

Much of what counts as content – and even as form – in Nina Canell's first London solo exhibition is, quite literally, up in the air. At the show's centre sits a dessicator, a tightly sealed glass jar containing (we're told) 3,800ml of air from the preserved St Petersburg study of Dmitri Mendeleev, who's credited with drafting the Periodic Table in the late 1860s. Supposedly, the Russian chemist came up with his solution of ordering the elements by atomic weight after drifting into a reverie at his desk. *Of Air* (2012), then, made with Canell's long-term collaborator Robin Watkins, playfully updates the legacies of both Marcel Duchamp's *Air de Paris* (1920) and Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Breath* (1960) while suggesting that inspiration and atmosphere are indivisible. (Exactly this hope, surely, is what leads us to haunt the workrooms of the great and gone.) More largely, though, it encapsulates the Swedish artist's bent, a metaphoric expansion of sculpture's parameters to admit the intangible and unstable.

The wall-mounted wooden frame of *Words Fallen* (2012), for instance, is in a sense as solid as art comes. Collecting and rising up within its shallow depth from the base, however, are tiny smoky grey chips that turn out to be coagulated air. The science eludes me; but the burden of the work, thanks to the misting of the glass, is that one assumes it to be still in process, ambience assuming provisional form. *Telepath* (2010), meanwhile, involves a horizontal copper pipe inserted into the walls in a corner of the gallery, forming a triangle, with a white neon tube draped over it, shaped as if soft and drooping, and coursing with 2,000 volts. It's a model, under these auspices, of wayward interiority: the copper and neon are the same lengths, but the electrified current has seemingly gone its own way.

Most delicately detaining, though, are those works that actively enlist the gallery's ambience: that turn every particle of nitrogen, oxygen, argon and carbon dioxide, every fluctuating air current, into a sculptural-conceptual unit. *Waver* (2010) articulates this most economically, being a vertical row of tuning forks embedded into the wall at different depths, as if testing or waiting for vibrations. More baroquely, *Into the Eyes as Ends of Hair (III)* (2012) starts at the ground with an antique Telefunken Bajazzo shortwave

radio (tuned, for what it's worth, to somewhere near Stuttgart). From its upward-pointing aerial is strung a fine cable that branches repeatedly, forming a tracery of sheathed and bare wires that rises upward and outward to the ceiling, coming to colonize almost half the gallery. The subdivisions culminate in myriad dangling wires, which turn the radio's antenna into a plentiful network of fine sensors: when these pick up microscopic electrical disturbances in the air, they emit fine sparks.

Such, at least, is the theory: you can linger at length in the gallery while this doesn't happen. What may suggest itself as you wait, though, is a kind of forcefield of invisible physical energies that keeps turning symbolic. Canell is not only suggesting that sculpture can be weightless – a formal gambit rooted in '60s dematerialization – but also, not unromantically, that this might synopsise untethered creative energies. 'Each thought has a size,' wrote Nicholson Baker in his 1983 essay 'The Size of Thoughts', 'and most are about three feet tall, with the level of complexity of a lawnmower engine, or a cigarette lighter.' He's being jokily precise, but you entertain the concept. Do the same in Cubitt, and Canell's works regroup into one big, interlaced, shifty environment that takes credit for the ideas one has before it, co-opts those scaled thoughts as part of itself, and walks a sweetly impudent line between maximal and minimal content. I heard nothing from the tuning forks, and I wasn't wholly convinced that Mendeleev's brilliance was trapped in the jar. But, finally, my eyes and ears scanning *Into the Eyes ...*, I thought I heard a crackle; I thought I saw a spark.

Martin Herbert

### Frieze

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# frieze

