

All the works featured in Nina Canell's first solo exhibition in Asia were produced between 2014 and 2015, except *Perpetuum Mobile* (40kg), an ongoing project that she started in 2009. Placed not in any of the three rooms in which the exhibition takes place, but at the main entry to the space, as if to mark the start of the exhibition, *Perpetuum Mobile* consists of an ultrasonic generator placed in a basin of water next to a paper sack of cement powder. As the water is atomised by the ultrasonic waves, it forms a mist that the cement powder continuously absorbs during the course of the exhibition, causing the material to solidify. In effect, the work creates a performance out of the laws of chemistry and physics: the form of matter (cement) is quietly transformed over time, its mass increasing (due to the absorption of the water), while energy (from the ultrasonic wave) is consumed. It is a sculpture that is always in the process of being made, in which the form of matter on show is sensitive to the conditions of its exhibition: the humidity of the environment and the timeframe of its exposure to it.

In a certain sense *Perpetuum Mobile* provides viewers with 'training' before they enter the exhibition proper – drawing their attention to artificial matters, forms, the durational nature

of forms, forms that are 'formless' (in this work, mist and ultrasound waves) and the transformation of forms and energy. On entering the galleries you see perfect examples of Canell's sculptural methodology: to change the forms of things and highlight their material 'reality' by inputting a certain amount of specific energy or some essential actions. For example, in *Brief Syllables (Weak)* and in *Brief Syllables (Saturated)* (both 2015), she uses a synthetic resin to mould a transparent cube around a section of cable. The cable, as carrier of digital information or electronic current, functions as the blood vessel and nerve fibre of our digital and electrically powered age. The section of cable that is beautifully imprisoned in the transparent acrylic cube is just like an organ immersed in formaldehyde; underneath its neutral, scientific appearance is a unique complex of beauty and vulnerability.

Cables also play an important role in many other works in this show. *Shedding Sheaths* (2015), a series of sculptures newly made for this show after a research trip in South Korea, takes the outer sheaths of fibre-optic cables (collected from cable-recycling factories on the outskirts of Seoul, a city known for having the fastest Internet speeds in the world) as its raw material. When the sheaths are gathered in the recycling

factories, they are sorted by colour; after being collected by Canell, they are heated, melted, deformed and finally reformed into sculpture-like lumps. In the third room of the exhibition, where these lumps are placed in a constellation on the cement floor, they look like intestines just cut out of some digital monster. The smell of heated plastic lingers and reminds one of Roland Barthes's description of the material in *Mythologies* (1957): 'more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation'.

Like *Perpetuum Mobile*, *Shedding Sheaths* also highlights Canell's obvious use of energy in the process of transforming her materials, to the extent that energy itself becomes a sculptural material. In *Thins* (2015) there is the magnetic force used to form a few thin nails into the shape of a tree branch; in *Near Here (1 Microsecond)* (2014), a 1-million-volt electric current has been passed over a carpet tile (for one microsecond) to create the burned-out image of its passing; and in *Tracing a Curve in Passing* (2015), energy is the soundwave produced by a waveform generator (the last two works are collaborations with Robin Watkins). In this sense, just as the exhibition title, *Satin Ions*, suggests, the show is indeed a compound of the sensual and the formless. *Aimee Lin*

Nina Canell *Satin Ions*
 Arko Art Center, Seoul 29 May – 9 August

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Shedding sheaths (detail), 2015, fibre-optic cable sheaths, concrete, dimensions variable. Photo: Robin Watkins. Courtesy the artist



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