

## REVIEWS

# Nina Canell "Energy Budget" at S.M.A.K., Ghent

by Laura Herman



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Nina Canell "Energy Budget" at S.M.A.K. – Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, 2018  
Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde Photography

Energy management is Nina Canell's main preoccupation in her latest show at S.M.A.K. The sculptural potential of conduction unites new and previous works, some operating as stores of energy, others as transmitters or receivers. The exhibition opens with *Energy Budget* (2018), a film made in collaboration with Robin Watkins that looks at manifestations of energy in two parts, respectively addressing forms of life and the environment. In the first part, the soft, muscular body of a leopard slug moves slowly across an electrical switchboard in extreme close-up. The animal's two pairs of antennae scan the environment in search of light and moisture. The second part slowly zooms out on skyscrapers in Hong Kong's Telegraph Bay, where a telegraph cable was placed at the end of the nineteenth century. Huge, gaping holes, also known as dragon gates, are cut into the high-

century. Huge, gaping holes, also known as dragon gates, are cut into the high-rises to allow dragons to descend from the rocky mountains of Hong Kong to the ocean, where they can drink and bathe. Despite the loss of valuable real estate in a capitalist state, energy blocks are literally removed to let the positive energy—known as *chi* in the theory of *feng shui*—freely flow.

This is the first time Canell has included a film in an exhibition, and perhaps unsurprisingly, it departs in several ways from the qualities familiar to her practice. The slow, motorized shots are distant and investigative, the camera movements smooth and controlled. The seriousness of the piece is quite opposed to the quirky sense of humor that permeates her lively sculptures. Her central question—how kinetic energy can become an “actor” in the sculptural process—leads to plastic experiments with often uncertain results. In keeping with the unpredictable nature of scientific experimentation, her sculptures emerge from changeable and intangible material processes; the work is characterized by a continuous state of incompleteness, and this elusive character lends it a political dimension. As in the case of *feng shui*, it seems impossible to capitalize on the energy absorbed or emitted by the work.

The conduction of energy cannot always be perceived with the naked eye. Last year, S.M.A.K. presented Canell's *Perpetuum Mobile (25kg)*, consisting of a bowl of water and a paper bag of cement. Ultrasonic waves induced a rising mist, causing the building material to slowly harden over the course of several weeks. While in this work one could observe the rising damp, the sculptures currently in the front hall of the museum seem to remain interminably still. Motionless cable stumps (*Brief Syllables* [2017], or “interruptions,” as Canell calls them, lie scattered throughout the gallery. In times when information is easily shared through “immaterial” channels like AirDrop, Bluetooth, and the cloud (a term encompassing the access, management, and transfer of data via the internet, which despite the name relies on a network of remote data centers that consume more than three percent of the world's total energy), the cables look like vestigial debris from an industrial past, but their non-functionality paradoxically suggests conductive relations. “If the exchange succeeds—if it is perfect, optimal, immediate—then the relation erases itself,” to echo Michel Serres. “But if the relation remains here, if it exists, it's because the exchange has failed.”<sup>1</sup> Serres's musings on the embedded history of matter and the materiality of the imagination have probably informed Canell's practice. Clearly, the artist is unconcerned with the technical functioning of her materials, which do not necessarily transfer or move things along, but do certainly conjure up something else. In Canell's art, poetics take precedence over servitude.

Other works also reveal the poetic potential of physical processes that cannot be precisely verbalized. In between the *Brief Syllables*, sticks of flesh-colored mastic gum are anchored to the floor (*Gum Drag* [2017-2018]). In this specific arrangement, both universal gravity and the atmospheric conditions specific to S.M.A.K. are responsible for the slowly changing forms of the flexible rods. The sticks of mastic—a material normally used to seal windows or to “balance” the flora of the digestive system—are set up as stately totems. The sculptures’ viscosity gives them a slapstick-like character: over time, the masses gently bend and sag. In the cabinets on either side of the central hall, smaller sculptures are presented, including *Days of Inertia* (2017), *Cucumbery* (2018), and an installation titled *Flexions* (2016-2018). That last, spread over three small rooms, consists of alloys with a low memory capacity, colloquially called “memory wire.” When short bursts of electricity heat up the wires, their previous shape is reactivated. When cooled, however, the shape is again forgotten. This choreography, activated by fluctuating temperature, is accompanied by sound: each time electricity flows through the different parts of the installation, the signal is converted into sound, filling the rather “empty” spaces with a dynamic soundscape.

Though the museum architecture seems to dominate Canell’s minimal work, she consciously selected rooms whose specific architectural and environmental conditions would influence her sculptural processes. This is apparent with the *Gum Drag* pieces, which are heated up by the direct sunlight entering the large hall, but also in the cabinets, where a thin layer of water pools on hydrophobic-coated stone tiles (*Days of Inertia*), reflecting the surroundings. In their unusual stillness, the puddles look like flat reservoirs of inert energy; any interference visible in the reflection—strolling visitors, rustling leaves, changing light—is imposed by the outside environment. Cucumber slices hanging on the wall (*Cucumbery*) are also concerned with storage and transmission: like the tiles, they retain water, and their dark green protective skins and veined interiors resemble the cross sections of the *Brief Syllables*. Like humans, snails, and buildings, cucumbers too conduct energy.

Canell excels in establishing connections and evoking formal and semantic associations between seemingly unrelated things using temperature, gravity, and pressure. She constantly extracts “materials” from the circuit of everyday reality, with the aim of managing their latent energy differently, or using them in an unexpected manner. She does this not to criticize the ways in which we deal with energy, but rather to make (energy) processes experientially palpable, instead of economically usable. In doing so, she reveals neglected values linked to energy that are spiritual, cultural, and political in nature.