



Caroline Achaintre, *Hocus Locus*, 2018, hand-tufted wool, 92 1/2 × 107 1/2".

Caroline Achaintre

GALERIE ART: CONCEPT

“Duo Infernal,” the first solo show in France for the French-born, London-based artist Caroline Achaintre, included woolen wall hangings, glazed ceramic sculptures, and psychedelic watercolors set against pink-accented walls. Borrowed from a 1982 song by the German punk band Extrabreit and Marianne Rosenberg, the exhibition’s title served as a reminder of the essential role that duality plays in Achaintre’s oeuvre. The artist’s consistently contradictory works appear at once functional and decorative, earthly and otherworldly, abstract and figurative. Like a Rubin’s vase illustration where the negative space between two profiled faces reads as an urn, Achaintre’s paintings and sculptures impel the viewer to flip back and forth between two realities and thus engage in an exercise that brings an existential flux to her works.

Achaintre uses a tufting gun to make large-scale woolen tapestries. Shooting strands of yarn through the back of tightly stretched canvases, she creates colorful irregular forms

that suggest fantastical trophy hides; threads of varying lengths alternately evoke silky hair, coarse fur, and even runny, dripping paint. *Hocus Locus* (all works cited, 2018), the larger of two tufted works on view, was inspired by the Ishtar Gate and recalls the ancient Babylonian yellow- and blue-glazed bricks of which it is made. Using mainly mustard and indigo wools, Achaintre reimagined the gate as an animistic curtain. Whereas the original structure was decorated with real and mythological animals, Achaintre's soft, porous version embodies two creatures: a canine (muzzle pointing to the right and perky tail at the left) and an anthropomorphic face with slitted eyes and a long narrow mouth, slightly agape. A harlequinesque pattern of yellow and purple diamonds running across the curtain recalls the gate's brick facade. Evoking traditional carnival and commedia dell'arte regalia, this motif (which appeared in several other works on view) also points to a key performative aspect of Achaintre's works, which are often described as masks or costumes.

Flouting their brittle reality, Achaintre's ceramics have more in common with her woolen works than one might expect. Mounted on adjacent walls, *Sembler* (Appear) and *Veneer* appeared stringy, light, and impossibly animate. Displayed on pedestals, *Severine* and *Nero* were uncanny shape-shifters that morphed from innocuous lumps into spooky medieval executioner-style hoods, depending on the viewer's perspective. Adding to the eerily mutable and transient nature of these ostensibly static sculptures, scute- and scale-textured surfaces coated with glossy glazes of black and muted celadon suggested freshly sloughed reptile skins.

Perhaps her most intimidatingly ambiguous body of work, Achaintre's watercolors are colorful and complex Rorschach tests. *Dead Ringers*, one of ten such works on view, could have been read as picturing a pair of conjoined hooded figures (conspicuously reminiscent of images of torture victims at Abu Ghraib prison) or as a single large face with pointy horns and bristly skin. Predator and prey fight for dominance in this willfully uncertain, yet troublingly evocative dual image. And while any analysis of Achaintre's work will most certainly reveal more about the viewer's inner psyche than about the artist's intent, it is perhaps precisely this feeling of introspective anxiety that she seeks to cultivate.

— Mara Hoberman