



View of “*Elsa Sahal*,” 2018. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

Elsa Sahal

GALERIE PAPIILLON

Though the title “*Elsa Sahal des origins à nos jours*” (Elsa Sahal from the Origins to Today) suggests a historical survey, the fifteen large-scale ceramic sculptures on view in Sahal’s recent exhibition were all made this year. Featuring an installation of primordial-looking sculptures arranged on a dark, sand-dusted platform, the show evoked origins of a different sort. In addition to providing a telluric mise-en-scène, the curvaceous room—filling stage represented the artist’s latest experiment with how to display sculpture. Having previously skewered headless humanoid forms on metal rods (“Pole Dance,” 2015) and suspended avian figures from thick straps (“Léda,” 2014–15), Sahal here reimagined the pedestal as kind of vivarium. Implying a biological symbiosis between pedestal and sculpture, her tall, stemless, leafless, petalless flower sculptures (“Pistils,” 2018–) had been planted into the platform so that they appeared to grow out of its sandy surface, while scaly sea-urchin-like mounds (“*Fleurs*” [Flowers], 2018–) inhabited the terrain alongside various lumpen headless creatures.

Sahal's large, minimalist flowers—erect pockmarked pistils topped with smaller pimply stigmata—appeared both menacing and vulnerable. This contradictory impression was compounded by the fact that the exposed phallic forms represent flowers' female reproductive parts. Adding to the hypersexualized appearance of the ambiguously gendered works (each titled *Pistil* and numbered 1 through 4), thick and runny applications of iridescent blue, yellow, and green glaze read as gluey and frothy secretions erupting from the bases of the stigmas and glistening moistly on the pistil shafts. In stark contrast to the "Pistils," several humanoid figures (*Nue posée* [Posed Nude], *Alchemist's Daughter no. 3*, and *Nageuse* [Swimmer], all 2018) appeared soft and fecund, their female-coded bodies seemingly melty with rolls of fat and drooping breasts. The most ornate in the group, *Alchemist's Daughter no. 3*, was coated with generous pours of opalescent green, matte orange, and metallic glazes. While the palette recalls North African ceramic tiles (a nod to Sahal's Tunisian ancestry), the artist's heavy and loose application of color evokes something more along the lines of a three-dimensional Helen Frankenthaler stain painting.

Indeed, Sahal's use of glaze for more than just chromatic effect gives her sculptures a distinct painterly quality. The coated surfaces of her sculptures alternately—and in many cases simultaneously—appear damp, charred, luminous, smooth, rough, corroded, and polished. Sahal's interest in evoking diverse textures and consistencies has occasionally led her to adorn sculptures with elements such as synthetic hair or gold leaf, trimmings that enhance the already haptic quality of her oeuvre. In several recent works, Sahal has added hand-poured glass—a kind of three-dimensional glaze—to bestow suggestive colors, textures, and volume on key areas of her sculptures. On top of baked and glazed bodies, such as *Nue posée*, hardened drips of translucent pink glass cover nipple-like protuberances and appear to ooze from indeterminate orifices like biological discharges. Drippy yet hard, these globules remind us of metamorphic properties of the artist's materials, and how she coaxes them from liquid to solid states and seemingly back and forth, again and again.

—Mara Hoberman

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