



Faith in Figures: A Conversation with Kira Freije

June 6, 2023 by Beth Williamson

Kira Freije's figures are emotive, seeming to yearn for human contact whether they stand alone or band together. They wear rudimentary clothing, and there is a palpable sense of movement in their almost choreographed positions, as they seem to stretch, bend, and beseech, perhaps even fly. Freije casts the hands, feet, and faces from people whom she knows and cares about, while the legs, arms, and bodies are bent, twisted, and welded into shape. Using industrial metalworking techniques, she creates unique worlds and populates them with

sympathetic individuals imbued with sensitivity and an understated spiritual element.

“river by night,” Freije’s current exhibition at Cample Line in rural southwest Scotland, focuses on two figures (*fireworks*, 2022) that gaze out beyond the gallery, seemingly considering the outside world. The taller of the two comforts its companion with a gentle arm around the shoulder. Freije’s grouping of her figures gestures to her strong sense of community, communicating a paradigm of care concerned with protection, respect, and nurturing, that ultimately brings with it hope for the future.

Beth Williamson: You studied at Oxford University’s Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art and the Royal Academy Schools in London. What was special about that time for you, and was there anything in particular that set you on your current path?

Kira Freije: Both places were hugely important. The Ruskin gave me an amazing foundation in the history of contemporary art, with small workshops and remarkable tutors, including Oona Grimes, Brian Catling, Dan Fox, Matthew Darbyshire, Michael Archer, and Simon Martin. I don’t think I knew anything about contemporary art before I went there, and I was receptive to it all seeping in. That definitely influenced me, and my work was changing all the time, with quite a minimal aesthetic. I always gravitated toward working with metal, and at the Ruskin it was very accessible. The sculpture studio was in the old stables. You could do whatever you wanted, make as much mess as you wanted. I was often trying to make things look perfect, trying to be like the artists I was learning about too much, as everyone does.

When I got to the RA, I was quite satisfied with the work I was making and feeling I was true to myself. It’s three years at the RA schools—you have time to fail and then come out of that. That’s probably what happened in a quite intentional way for me. I was then able to find a language that felt exciting to me. That gave me a foundation to work from, and the RA teaches you to rely on intuition. At the RA, you’re given more autonomy to rely on yourself, in a way. It felt like a good antidote to the Ruskin.

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BW: There are several recurring elements and themes in your work, most obviously the figures. They all seem to have individual emotional states. I can imagine that when they are installed, the way that they relate to the architectural space of gallery brings another layer of meaning. Why is the human presence so important to you?

KF: It is the most direct way of emotional representation. I feel like my work has always attempted to have human presence within it. I used to make work about the residue of human touch; now I feel it's exciting to create figures. When they're successful, they have an emotional presence and a silence, especially in a quiet gallery space. It feels like there is endless potential to construct worlds in which the figures and their state of being can shift. I'm not yet done with making them. I think

they can get better and be more powerful. They are cast from life, especially the faces. You can't cast with open eyes, so all of their eyes are closed by necessity. It's not something I ever notice, though I think about it when I'm casting, and I wonder if there will be a time when I either construct the faces myself (which I've done before with clay, then cast) or chisel out the eyes in a classical way so there is a void. But I love the way they function at the moment because they are all in some kind of devotional state, though it's unknown whether that's blissful contemplation or fear. They often swing between those states, and there is often a sense of things crashing down.



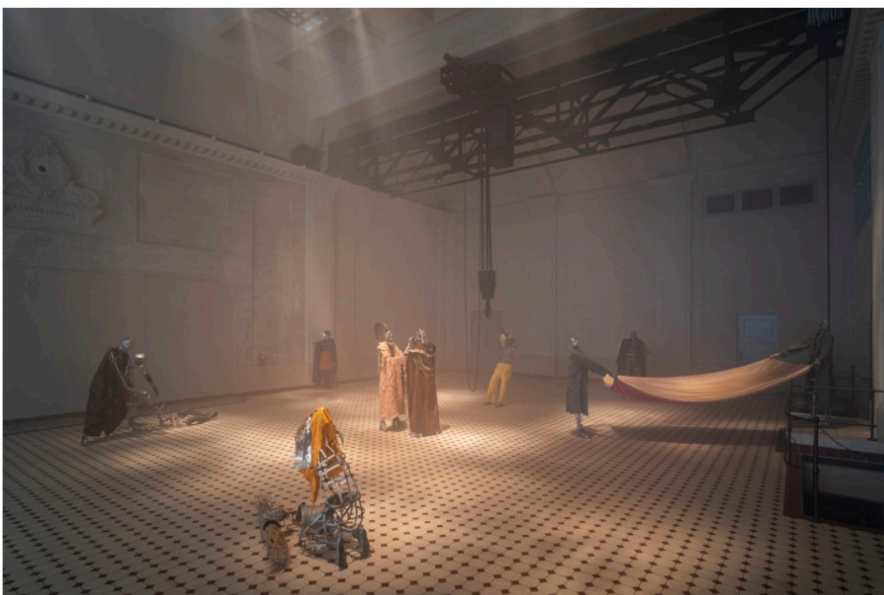
Moving towards the calm one, whose arms open, the breadth of happiness in measurable form, 2021. Stainless steel and cast aluminum, 166 x 67 x 85 cm. Photo: Mike Bolam

BW: When you look at them, there is a sense that something quite deep is going on. The fact that their eyes are closed doesn't seem to be a barrier to engaging with them; it doesn't shut them down.

KF: No, not at all, which is really interesting.

BW: **Cample Line is quite an unusual space for an exhibition; it's very rural and almost domestic in scale—the building was originally a millworker's cottage. Your installation for the exhibition “The Material Revolution” at E-WERK Luckenwalde in Germany, on the other hand, is in an old power station. Did you seek out these venues, or did they find you?**

KF: They found me. I usually make the work with the space in mind, but I wouldn't call it site-specific. Some of the lamp works at Cample were made for certain corners there. At E-WERK Luckenwalde, the candle sconces were made specifically, and one of the figures hangs off an on-site gantry. At E-WERK, I wanted them to be quite grounded because the ceiling height is so vast. In the past, I've created layers within a body of work, which Cample has a bit of, where lights are hanging from chains and create different levels within the space. But I am also excited by a landscape of figures. They all relate to each other, but not in a specific narrative, and at the same time they are very interior-oriented. I enjoy that they are intentionally in place around each other, even though they are very much in different states of being, even different time periods somehow.



Installation view of *The Throat is a Threaded Melody*, part of “The Material Revolution,” Agnes Denes, Kira Freije, FM Einheit & Vinzenz Schwab, E-WERK Luckenwalde, Germany, 2023. Photo: Mathias Völzke, Courtesy E-WERK Luckenwalde

KF: Yes, I work on them all at once. There is usually one that begins things, and they all spin off that. They are made quite intuitively and change as they are being formed. I never want to fix them or their actions. There is always an idea in my head about what they could be doing, but it's quite a fleeting idea, and that's when it is best, I think.

BW: How do you know when you've completed a group? For instance, do you think that you've completed the Luckenwalde group?

KF: I'm not sure that I have. I feel that it could keep growing. Maybe that's something I need to consider going forward. Are these figures all part of one mass? I do think this is a cohesive, yet mad group of figures in a world.



Detail of *The Throat is a Threaded Melody*, part of "The Material Revolution," Agnes Denes, Kira Freije, FM Einheit & Vinzenz Schwab, E-WERK Luckenwalde, Germany, 2023. Photo: Mathias Völzke, Courtesy E-WERK Luckenwalde

BW: Where did the exhibition title "river by night" come from?

KF: That came from the title of one of the works. (I did the same thing last summer for "The Borrowed Condition," an exhibition at Strange Cargo Gallery in Cheriton in Folkestone.) Some of the works at Cample were part of "meteorites," an exhibition last year at The Approach gallery in London. The title comes from a sculpture that recalls a street lamp. It was made with the desire that there would be a feeling of being beside the Thames, or any river. The blown glass in *river by night* is a particularly murky blue. The fleeting idea in my head was a slightly cinematic feeling of a river scene at night, so the title feels quite pertinent. It is important to me that individual titles somehow capture those fleeting feelings.

BW: At Cample, the two figures in *fireworks* stand together as if looking out of a window at the green space below, while the figure in *permanence of a sacred tongue* (2022) is dropped on one knee, her head thrown back and hands raised. What's going on here?

KF: It is those fleeting ideas. *fireworks* has the feeling of a loving relationship that is looking into destruction or hope, but not sure which. Their hands almost touch, there's a closeness to them. They look out to mortality or contentment. *permanence of a sacred tongue* is a devotional figure, looking up in devotion or fear of what might come. There is a love or appreciation of human frailty.



fireworks, 2022. Stainless steel, cast aluminium, wool, and felt, 180 x 135 x 56 cm. Photo: Mike Bolam

BW: What's your favorite work in the Cample show?

KF: It's probably *fireworks*. I feel it has formed the basis of the body of work that I'm making now. It has a faith in love and care, but also a transition to a kind of frailty or threat to contentment.

BW: Is the idea of care important in your work? I am struck by how the hands, feet, and faces are all cast and recognizable—you can imagine them touching—whereas the bodies are a framework.

KF: It makes for an interesting process of making. They are constructed from people who are important to me in my life. Beyond the forming of a body to approximate human scale, there is something very tactile about their construction. I think that is important to me, and to my way of living. I feel quite caring of them. It will be sad and daunting when they go.

“river by night” is on view at Cample Line through June 10, traveling to Kestle Barton in Helston, Cornwall, June 18–September 3, 2023. “The Material Revolution,” with works by Agnes Denes, FM Einheit and Vinzenz Schwab, and Kira Freije, is on view at E-WERK Luckenwalde through July 16, 2023.

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