

## Heidi Bucher review – memories are made of this

**Parasol Unit, London** Sculptor, performer and plaster caster extraordinaire, the late Swiss artist Heidi Bucher conjures the past in literal feats of reincarnation

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# A

house floats in midair, light filtering through its tawny gold windows. There are shutters and shingles and a period look to the building, which is as classic as a drawing from childhood. But the windows are not made of glass, nor are the shutters wooden, and the house is more like a wall hanging than a substantial installation. It appears to be made out of cloth dipped in beeswax, possibly painted and yet indented with ridges, frames and panels like a real facade. It hangs in the gallery like a dream, fragile but powerfully beautiful.

This is the work of the Swiss artist Heidi Bucher (1926-93), sculptor, performer, embalmer, visionary. It hovers between two and three dimensions, like all of her surviving works. Bucher was not prolific and her career was short-lived – a great flourishing in the 70s and 80s, followed by a bewildering neglect that has only quite recently been reversed. This is her first full-scale survey in Britain, and anyone with the slightest interest in the preservation of memories might like to see it.

For Bucher's works are literally traces of the past, very often her own past, growing up in the antique elegance of Winterthur. Here is her commemoration of parquet from a grand house, patterned with a star and looking strangely like a Jasper Johns painting. Here is the floor of her grandparents' study, mounted in panels on the wall with an eerie iridescence. And the doors of the psychiatric sanatorium in Kreuzlingen where Anna O, one of Sigmund Freud's first case histories, a tragic figure at the dawn of psychoanalysis, was treated.

Even if you had no idea where these pieces were made, or how, they carry a palpably solemn and poignant history. Doors to buildings that can never be re-entered; disabled shutters; sightless windows through which light passes as through a veil. The size of life and very like, these objects are captivating, instantly conjuring specific places that clearly mean something particular to the artist, but to us too – sliding into the mind as if they were our own memories.

This has a great deal to do with the method Bucher hit on in the late 1960s, when she began making what she called her "skinnings". She would press gauze against the surface of an object or building (or even a person, in her own case) and then smooth liquid latex into the gauze. Just before it dried hard, she would peel off this "skin", as if it were a monumental face mask. The result is somewhere between residue, facsimile and ghostly essence – a thing flaccid as skin but with its own force and strength, suspended from wall or ceiling.

The skin often takes something with it: not just the impression of a door or room, but flakes of paint or vanish, a residue of dust, the imprint of splinters, cracks or nails. Sometimes the fabric is perfectly untouched, producing an extremely pale and spectral effect; sometimes a little paint is used, so that one wall glows, while the wall and door to the freezing unit in the old

butcher's premises where Bucher had a studio, in Zurich, is like a faded theatre set, with a faint sheen of pearly light. These are never just casts, pure and simple.



Libellenkleid (Dragonfly costume object), 1976 by Heidi Bucher.  
Photograph: Estate of Heidi Bucher Photograph by Daniele Kehr

Bucher was making these works long before the generation of plaster-casters that includes Antony Gormley and Rachel Whiteread. What she makes is not solid, of course, but neither is it as ephemeral and weightless as it looks. A film at Parasol Unit shows the artist labouring to haul the fabric bindings from the doors of the sanatorium: tough, heavy, stiff as tarpaulins; she is physically overwhelmed, disappearing beneath it in her old man's coat – hidden by the work she has made.

Bucher was also known as a performance artist; another film shows vast silver vessels drifting and bobbing on a beach like wave-born flotsam, but actually manned from within by Bucher and her family, whose feet you occasionally see. Another shows one of her fragile houses lifting off into the clouds, like a home gone up in smoke. Many smaller pieces commemorate people through the beds they slept in, the petticoats they wore, or the aprons tied around a woman's waist daily for years, a tribute to her person as well as her labour.

Some of these works are like brass rubbings, others more like shrouds or unravelled bandages, preserved behind glass or on small tables. Particles of mother-of-pearl settle upon them like dust, or very fine snow; so that they already appear to be halfway into some other world.

Bucher's great gift is for characterising memory itself through this summoning of the past in forms that are tangible yet only quasi-solid – something very filmy held intact, momentarily as it seems, by an image. Draw close to one of her gauzy walls and it still holds the pungent scent of the damp old place it commemorates. Once we lived in these places, she reflects, now they live on in us.