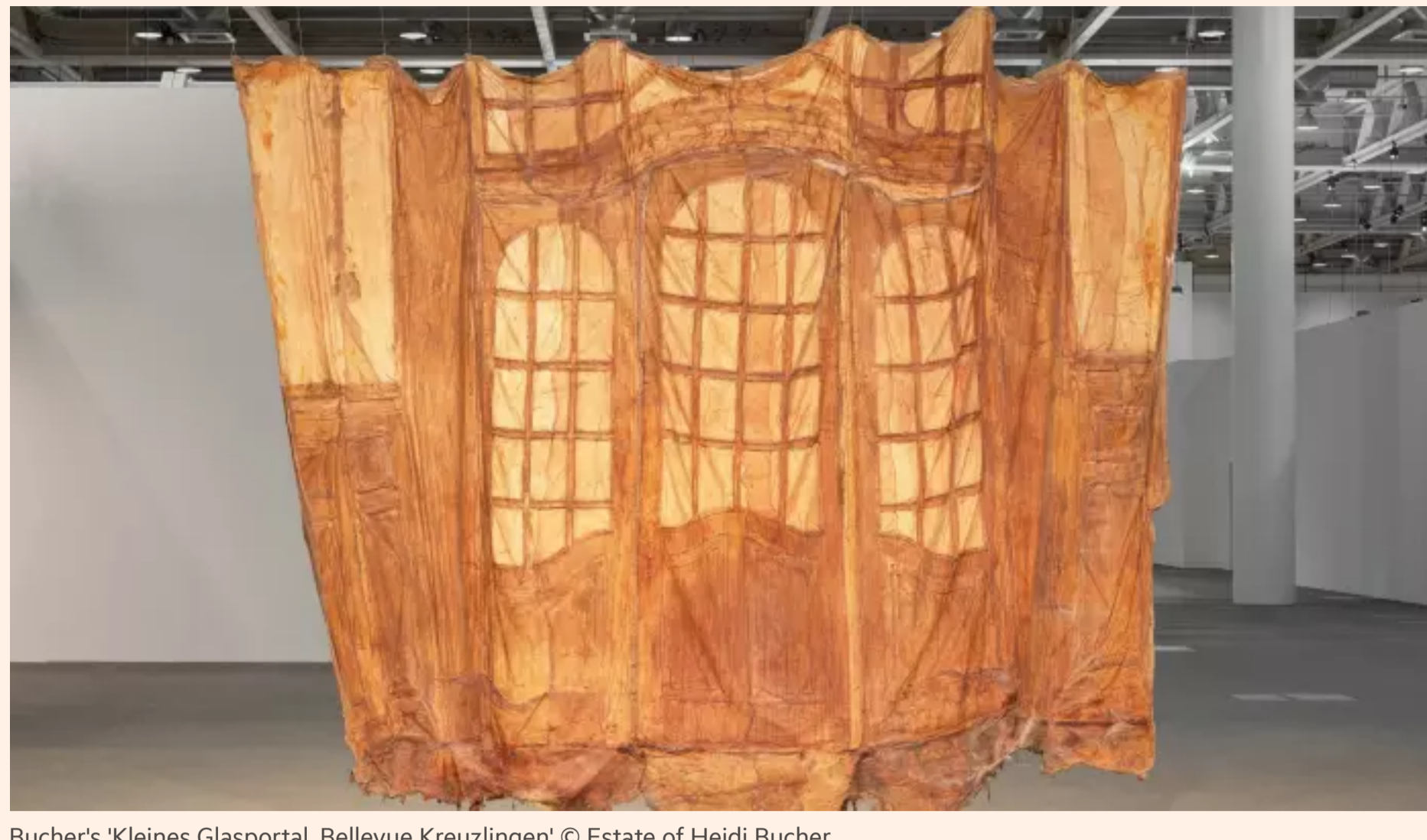


Heidi Bucher at Parasol Unit – mesmerising chronicles of anonymous lives

The Swiss artist weaves together the concerns of Francesca Woodman and Rachel Whiteread: spaces, skins and the psyche



Bucher's 'Kleines Glasportal, Bellevue Kreuzlingen' © Estate of Heidi Bucher

Rachel Spence OCTOBER 5, 2018



Before there was Francesca Woodman and Rachel Whiteread, there was Heidi Bucher. You are probably familiar with the first two. Woodman, an American, died tragically young in 1982, leaving a body of troubled, enchanting, photographic self-portraits of a young woman merging with her surroundings: folding herself under the wallpaper, hanging from lintels, rising out of the floor like a chimera. Whiteread, the contemporary British sculptor, takes herself out of the picture, preferring instead to cast architectural spaces in negative so that we are left with mute inside-out sheds and blind windowframes, their traditionally empty spaces spookily filled with solid, opaque matter.

Bucher, however, is far from a household name in the UK. Indeed, the Parasol Unit's show is the first major survey of the Swiss artist since her death in 1993. We should be grateful to the east London space, for Bucher is an artist who weaves together the concerns of Woodman and Whiteread — spaces, skins and the psyche — into a body of work that leaves us entranced, cleansed and subtly changed.

Bucher was born in 1926 in Winterthur in Switzerland, and was little in her early life, ostensibly, to stamp her as an artist determined to delve into buried psychological strata. She was the only child of a well-off, bourgeois family. A spell at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich saw her come into contact with artist-pedagogues Max Bill and Johannes Itten, but their vision — spotless, hopeful Bauhaus geometries — seem to have left no mark on her practice. A spell in New York in the 1950s introduced her to Dutch Cobra painter Karel Appel, whose surreal, unflinching expressiveness might have prompted her to look inward — at the world of dreams, for example — in order to travel outwards with her imagery.

Another decade in Switzerland in the 1960s was followed by her return to the US, this time to California. It was here that she met artist Ed Kienholz, a maker of tableaux that illuminated the trashy underside of the American dream. Kienholz became a life-long friend, and perhaps helped crystallise the vision out of which Bucher made her first mature work, “Bodyshells Venice Beach” (1972). Captured on 16mm film and shown at Parasol Unit, this performance on a wintry, windswept, distinctly inhospitable shore — if this is Venice Beach, it's not as you know it — comprises lunar-pale, life-size objects, somewhere between church bells and dustbins, moving tentatively across the sand as the figures inside them struggle to keep their balance.

Most likely triggered by the Moon landings of 1969, “Bodyshells” is not entirely successful — the objects, despite their inspiration, are if anything too alien from their environment. However, it shows the fascination with the tension between container and contained, which Bucher would go on to explore with extraordinary inventiveness.

It is this late body of works, made from the mid-1970s through to the early 1990s, that Parasol Unit displays. The large, luminous ground-floor gallery is devoted to Bucher's casts of interiors. Referred to as “skins” by the artist, these include doors, windows, balconies and floors that Bucher has covered in gauze, soaked with latex rubber, then peeled off just as it is about to dry.

The results are a festival of anti-architecture at its most distressed, dilapidated and decayed. Most spectacular, perhaps, is “Kleines Glasportal, Bellevue Kreuzlingen” (“Small glass portal, Bellevue Kreuzlingen”) from 1988. At 340cm x 465cm, it's a vast, burnt-orange membrane imprinted by the original trio of glass-panelled windows. Hanging from the gallery ceiling, it suggests a monstrous, amputated insect wing charred by a murderous blaze. In reality, Bellevue was a former psychiatric hospital — previous residents include Anna O, one of Freud's most renowned case histories. When you know this, it's impossible not to look at “Kleines Glasportal” without Brontësque anti-heroines — remember Heathcliff's first wife leaping to her death in flames? — coming to mind.

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carapaces like whispers or glimpses of lives that once passed over these disembodied thresholds.

Mounted on the wall downstairs, three casts of doors — two lifted from a barracks, another merely listed as originating in Chimida in Lanzarote, where Bucher spent time — retain traces of their original colours, warm browns, bone-white, sea-bright turquoise. These hues flicker

through their blind, apparently solid

Bucher's gift for reading architecture like a spectral diary written by its past inhabitants sets her apart from other architectural artists, such as Whiteread, and also the US 1970s practitioner Gordon Matta-Clark, whose devastated buildings she probably knew but whose lofty conceptualism she didn't share.

What Bucher was hunting was not ideas but people. As she puts it, in writings quoted in the catalogue, “I look at the walls, the doors, the windows, the ceilings and the floors/ I touch them. I observe them for a long time/ I must come closer to everything/ I come, we come at the right time, with gauze. We glue it in all the spaces and listen carefully.”

Upstairs on the first floor, Bucher pays, if anything, even more sensitive attention to those lost voices. Here, we find sculptures that originate in articles of clothing — dresses, aprons, an all-in-one undersuit — which Bucher has embalmed in latex and treated with mother-of-pearl, an iridescent pigment that always fascinated her.

Pinned on the wall like petrified insects, these mummified garments have a tragic, brittle sweetness. It comes as no surprise to learn that Bucher loved dragonflies because their brief exquisite incarnation encapsulated her longing for beauty at its most frail and ephemeral.

The most moving works, however, are not the sculptures but the frottages she took of the latex-bound clothing. These rubbings, in linseed oil, graphite and mother-of-pearl on paper, are traces of traces, so ethereal only the outline and faintest hint of colour is left. In order to decipher the origins of these faded, evanescent images, we must lean towards them in an intimacy which allows us to feel what Bucher described as: “Life, the past, the forgotten . . . caught up in the cloth and . . . clinging there together.”

By the end of this show, I longed to see Bucher displayed alongside the German titan Anselm Kiefer, who has made collage paintings in which ladder-like columns of ash-soaked children's dresses evoke his country's unspeakable crime. Bucher steers clear of such public history yet her mesmerising, illegible chronicles of anonymous lives transcend their personal origins to possess, as with Kiefer's best work, a resonance that is urgent, universal and humane.

To December 9, parasol-unit.org