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Heidi Bucher
Sara Roffino
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BROOKLYN RAIL CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

HEIDI BUCHER

by Sara Roffino

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Growing up in the rural Swiss village of Winterthur, Heidi Bucher (1926 – 93) was expected to marry a man who would carry on the family construction business. She rebelled. Studying fashion and leaving for California, then moving to New York, and eventually to the Canary Islands, Bucher remained relatively itinerant throughout her life, though always returning to Winterthur and the ideas of space, form, and architecture that formed her familial heritage. Two complementary shows of Bucher's work—one at the Swiss Institute and the other at Alexander Gray Associates—present Bucher's explorations of the constructed boundaries between exterior and interior, self and other, past and present.

Trained as a designer and tailor, Bucher first found notoriety with her *Landings to Wear* series (1967 – 70), sculptures-cum-clothing the artist made in collaboration with Carl Bucher, her husband of many years. The *Landings to Wear* were not conserved, but images of them, including a cover of *Harper's Bazaar* where they appeared in January 1969, are presented at the Swiss Institute. Comprising the first stage of her oeuvre, here they share a room with a scaled model of Bucher's ancestral home, a site where she made many *skinnings*, the major works for which Bucher is most recognized.



Heidi Bucher, "Untitled (Herrenzimmer)," undated.
Latex, cotton, approx. 102 1/4 x 71 x 7 1/2". Courtesy
Freymond-Guth Fine Arts, Zurich.

First covering a room or an exterior with simple cotton gauze, Bucher would then layer on latex, and allow it to dry. Afterward, the material would be peeled off, along with trace elements of paint, rust, or dirt often embedded into the works' surfaces. *Skinings* of three of the four walls of Bucher's parents' study form "Harrenzimmer" (1977 – 79), which hangs—in a three-dimensional re-creation of the room that visitors must pass through in order to see the show—like a benevolent ghost in large, fragile sheaths extending from the ceiling of the Swiss Institute's main room. Bits of dust, original or perhaps acquired later, nestle within the crevices of distinct forms: where the walls meet the floor, where the interior molding protrudes outward. Within the wall abutting the entrance to the space is a door, left ajar, as if someone had run out in a hurry intending, but failing, to return.

Beyond "Harrenzimmer" on the far wall hangs "Parquet floor of study in Winterthur-Wüflingen" (1979), a grid of panels six rows across and seven down. Dark brown squares separated by a few inches of wall space are marked with a weave of lines making clear the contiguous relation between the panels—they are *skinings* of the floor, frozen in time, sealed in latex, and yellowing slowly. In the corner, below the grid sits a dusty trunk with the initials "A.B." on either side. Someone, it appears, was aching to leave. They are packed and ready, but seem never to have departed.

The *skinings* at Alexander Gray are significantly smaller in size than the ones at the Swiss Institute, but they offer a deeper intimacy; intricate details of walls, floors, and moldings invite examination, while their close proximity within the gallery encourages a dialogue among the works. All but one of the *skinings* are mounted or framed in middle-tone wood or white, setting apart the sole dark square in the gallery, a small piece, intense, and the most interesting. Made from the wall of the Villa Bleuler—a historic Zurich mansion that is now the Swiss Institute for Art Research—"Fragment Villa Bleuler"(c. 1991) stands out on the black background selected by Bucher herself. The interwoven patterns of leaves and grids settled into the amber matter extend its history far beyond its objecthood; the structure feels laden with an ancient weight.

Bucher had an affinity for dragonflies—the way they are born in a particular form, live the majority of their lives as nymphs underwater, climb into the air, shed their skins, and become the flying creatures we see at lakeside beaches. Unlike the dragonfly, humans don't have the capacity to slough off our exteriors. And we can't embalm our histories and abandon them to decomposition. As much as Bucher's *skinings* act as a metaphorical shedding of skin, they could also be an attempt at sealing her history, perhaps as a means of starting anew, or perhaps as a means of reconciling the final sentient transition into death. Like Eva Hesse's "Contingent"—a similarly large piece compiled of multiple latex hangings and created 10 years earlier—Bucher's *skinings* were not made to stand the test of time. For both artists, the insistence on a material they knew would decay seems less a melancholic resignation to their own impermanence than an homage to the inevitability, and beauty, of that impermanence.