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Cooper Jacoby: Disgorgers

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COOPER JACOBY BY ANNIE GODFREY LARMON

To decry Gothic architecture, Raphael cited, in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century, its "imitation of uncut trees, of which the branches make, when bent and tied down, sharp pointed two-centered arches...the pointed arch has none of the grace of the perfect circle; nature herself uses no other form than the latter." The Gothic arch's demerit, it would seem, was that it mimicked another human-wrought form, rather than the purer one of the Italian painter's Grecian ideal. It's always been the human project, to beat nature at her game—and the dialectical project of others to demonstrate the dead ends of this pursuit.

The lot of Cooper Jacoby's work has a Raphaelite Gothic aspect. That is, it finds interest in the failings and recuperations of morphological expressions; in the way in which a form gains, loses, or feigns value in its variations and as it circulates and is materially transferred. In sculpture and installation, he distills into inscrutably menacing objects clever narratives of absorption, adhesion, condensation, corrosion, and drift. But for all their reference to messiness and failure, Jacoby's works are neat, sleek. We might think of them as anexact—as pure representations of impurities.

Jacoby often begins with a design object; either from the modernist canon or from the Para-communities that have rejected that canon. Take BAIT (2017), a series that casts George Nelson's airy pendant-shaped cocoon lamps as noxious beacons. Jacoby extracts from the iconic mid-century design the various forms and industries that made Nelson's conception of it possible and foils them with reference to the darker valences of those very precursors. On steel armatures, Jacoby applied the same Cocoon silk-like plastic used by Nelson, and printed onto each lamp the patterns of moth wings. These patterns are drawn from moths which are not poisonous, but borrow the colorations and textures of poisonous species in a lambent act of biomimicry. Contained in each shade is a custom-designed ultraviolet bug zapper, which appears to the human eye as a neon blue light but communicates more ecstatic things to other species. Cocoon, a water-proof, impenetrable vinyl coating, was engineered by the military after WWII to protect its arsenal and was conceived after the textile-like structure of its name-sake. It was designed as a protectant, but for the pernicious purposes of the military. There's

a not-subtle resonance with this incongruity here, which accumulates as so many fried insects on the grills of Jacoby's cool blue bulbs, installed inside the safe-haven façade of impersonator moth camouflage.

Winged-things don't fare any better in the 2016-2017 series HIVE. In 2011, Philips Design created a prototype for a "Microbial Home," a balanced ecosystem in which all waste would be converted into viable resources. This home, which was ultimately untenable because of scale, included a glass urban beehive that allowed inhabitants to support the endangered bee population and to source their own local honey. Jacoby drew from these failed "utopic" designs, inverting the amber drop-shaped glass domes of the original hives and placing within them fabricated plastic honeycombs installed with scrap catalytic converters, whose design uses the honeycomb structure to trap exhaust. But here, the carbon monoxide-trapping coating of the converters corrodes and leaks, producing exhaust rather than absorbing it. These hives make a literal point about such products created using bio-mimicry—they draw from nature only to exhaust it. And they make a more reflexive point about the specific instance of biomimicry this work takes up: air pollution is, of course, in part to blame for the collapse of the bee population.

Other works dig deeper into the socio-economic elements of sustainability: in 2016, the artist noticed that poorer neighborhoods in his native LA were inexplicably flooding due to a backed up hydrological system. To make the problem conspicuous, Jacoby cast a series of gutters in such rain-dry neighborhoods in fiberglass and somber graphite. At the base of each cast is a resin "puddle," in which rests a fragment of a white vinyl approximation of the acupuncture meridian system — a diagnostic network theory of the body that seeks to optimize circulation. At Mathew gallery in Berlin, Jacoby mounted the exhibition Stagnants, in which four of these gutters together made up the body's entire meridian system. Pulled apart and displayed autonomously at the gallery, the gutters point to infrastructure failure, connecting the urban ecosystem to that of a broken body

There's something of the Gothic in this impulse to "make explicit," too. Gothic architecture made aesthetic the surfacing of its inner-scaffolding. Several of Jacoby's projects likewise surface, through inversions of function or structure, otherwise invisible systems. For his most recent exhibition, Disgorgers, at LUMA Westbau in Zurich, Jacoby sought to "throw the homeostatic, climatic operations of the building into relief," homing the viewer into the mechanisms and energies that support their experience in space. To do this, he installed a series of appliance-cum-sculptures in two galleries that alternated between stasis and crisis. Emphasizing how slight the distance can be between these two modes, his objects retool the often-precarious designs of alternative communities who aim to reconceptualize mainstream technologies for ecofriendly infrastructures. In the first gallery, sculptures that wed the components and cast elements of a contemporary composter ball with replicas of Arcosanti bronze bells played tedious telephone hold music. In the second space, a water heater, an assisted readymade Shaker stove, and a radiator inspired by those produced for the Taos

Earthships (passive, upcycled solar houses) are activated by a diesel generator when a black out is triggered by a programmed system. The effect was of schizophrenic suspense muted to suit the institutional calm of the gallery's white walls, their idealism shot through with paranoia

In Disgorgers, the gaping, hyperbolic gullets of gargoyles were everywhere, tearing holes into each of the appliances. These grotesqueries – meant to spew water and waste away from buildings – have proven across history to be contradictory icons, first protectors from evil spirits and then symbols of terror. Aptly, Jacoby sourced his mouths from the facades of bank buildings in New York City. One such mouth is centered on the work Disgorger (Radiator) (2017), a sealed window box that, built into the window of the gallery, houses the exhibition's generator. The machine's exhaust fumes form a patina around the gargoyle's mouth—the only clue that, from the safety of the aseptic gallery, we are (perhaps unwittingly) confronted with a hotbox of carbon monoxide.

In many of Jacoby's exhibitions, you'll find works from the 2015 EOL series, comprising lights whose fixtures were modified to overheat expired fluorescent bulbs, resulting in an incessant dim flicker that casts an uncertain glow across his projects, like Dan Flavin gone noir. The artist calls this a "purgatorial stutter." These sculptures bring to mind a line from Anne Carson: "When the equilibrium of a self-regulating system is reminded of the slow death in which it is suspended, the motor may falter." Or, like this: when a body tries to square just exactly how it knows how to breathe, breathing suddenly becomes labored, fearful. It seems we are ever unreconciled about the directions new technologies will take us – closer to or further away from the intentions and designs of nature. But, as Jacoby's work often reminds us, to falter, to hiccup or spasm, is to be reminded that nature self-engineers to solve her own problems.









