

Presque-vu

By Matthew Kyba

A strange phenomenon occurs when one can *almost* remember a memory, term, or detail, yet falls short as it barely escapes them. Concentration seems to grip the sand too tightly as whatever we hoped to recall slowly falls through our fingers. As an artist, Jen Aitken capitalizes on this sense of Presque-Vu, or almost seen. The French term doesn't perfectly translate, but insinuates an on the tip of the (mental) tongue. Instead of searching for a reference or connection that her new series *Kaloune* tantalizingly entices, she invites the viewer to consider the reason we require intertextuality to preface artworks. Aitken critiques the art historical habit of privileging content over form, while showcasing how these two elements are inseparable. In employing almost familiar but ultimately ambiguous forms, the exhibition's uncertainty implores the viewer towards their own meaning-making through physical spatial orientation and directly investigating the work as autonomous objects.

Aitken's series *Kaloune* at YYZ beckons the strange feeling of having synapses crackle and snap, but not quite connect. As the viewer quizzically ponders and slightly agonizes over what seems familiar (but isn't), the pieces wedge themselves between recognition and uncertainty. The geometric forms possess a unique materiality. Even though these materials appear to point towards everyday concrete substances, their assemblage juxtaposed with their surfaces' eclectic imprints of other elements fog up easy readings. Adorning the walls and columns, the works seem like fragments of construction. However, they also could act as remnants of modernist furniture, architectural models, 3-dimensional paintings, or even unfinished dioramas. Their ambiguity is their power; Aitken's pieces are the sign without the signified. Concrete is a medium that has many cultural connotations. Connections to urbanization, capitalism, development, architecture, DIY home projects, and Roman invention all occur alongside a myriad of other signifiers. However, Aitken's ambiguous forms merely tease these references instead of explicitly alluding towards them. Absent of original referent, pieces in *Kaloune* are autonomous symbols that resist contextualization.

The missing referent is a constant theme in Aitken's practice, specifically when looking at online images of her work. We can look at Aitken's past works as existing in three stages: the idea or concept, the reified form, and the recorded file (on or offline). While the artwork can only *literally* exist physically, images of artworks are increasingly disseminated and the artworks live on through the digital means. Within virtual worlds her works endure beautifully; gorgeous photo-documentation with perfect angles and lighting elevate the images towards works of art themselves. Of course, these images only display perfectly curated singular perspectives, where in-person any and all angles can be seen. The artist is conscious of her works' digital presence and understands the division between these versions. Existing in an internet-centered society results in extremely digestible images propagating online and through social platforms, where often JPEGs can act as stand-ins for the real thing. Is it okay to say someone saw an exhibit if only online? Although these images are near convincing depictions of her work, the exact physical objects can't be fully translated.

Aitken's newly created *Kaloune* works operate in multiple antithetical states. The lightness and thinness of her pieces go against the heaviness of concrete. Her molds (consisting of wood, cardboard, and more) leave lingering natural impressions onto their hardened surfaces. Materiality is apparent in the works, not only due to the dynamic simplicity of concrete, but also the various other materials traced upon the exteriors. Aitken's process of production also hints at binary statuses within the works. Her concrete mixture begins to form when adding water with the cement, paper pulp, and other ingredients to quickly become an easily malleable and viscous liquid. Impressionable and elastic, the material is molded into an opaque and (almost) impenetrable finished product. *Kaloune's* material aesthetic references two opposite conditions: The soft process and the hard product, through traced remnants from other material imprints.

Semiotics plays an important role within the exhibition, even if the works seem devoid of identifiable language. Recurring forms often point to an invisible law that the artistic process follows a restraint that fosters their creative autonomy. These rules for creation result in different iterations of forms that are aesthetically akin to one another through repetitious production processes. Recurrent figures allow for the works to provide a visual language that could ostensibly operate when all pieces are grouped together. Each sharp edge, long curve, balanced plane, and unique surface detail define these sculptures that have no top or bottom, no beginning or end. Side by side, these pieces share an unseen casting process that created them. Their production underscores how the constant repetition of visual cues interacts to create a pictorial syntax that appears both recognizable yet undecipherable.

Adding onto her visual semiotics, Aitken also invents her own words for her series titles. Reading over current and previous titles such as *Kaloune*, *Phaxa*, *Lunopel*, *Galomindt*, or *Yna*, each term could suggest a foreign languages word or phrase. Aitkens created terms allude to etymological understanding; the roots of these words seem possibly Germanic, Latin, Middle Eastern, or Eastern European, and therefore can be somewhat traced through history. However, Aitken has carefully chosen these titles so that they possess no connection or identifiable link with real dialects. Instead, her terms are decoys and stand-ins, elements used to resist and critique our persistence for an artworks contextualization. Inverting the traditional mantra of Modernisms form follows function, Aitken suggests that form is content. Her objects *do* something spatially and materially, instead of just pointing to other things. Far from an outmoded and impossible refusal of content, *Kaloune* makes conscious the need of taxonomy and desire to systemically classify art objects.

Interestingly, her artworks sometimes develop in two-dimensional platforms, as Aitken will occasionally plan and test not-yet-realized works within 3D modeling computer programs. Though Aitken initially sought out the computer process to speed up the development of her creations, it had an unexpected and exciting effect on her thinking about form and space. In her previous series from 2015-16, titled *Numa*, Aitkens virtual process led to more intricate and complex forms, which in turn necessitated a simplification of her materials. In *Kaloune*, Aitken worked for the first time without making plans or maquettes, opting for a more reactionary process by intuitively adding one component to another until the mold was complete. In doing so, her forms are more open-ended, unfinished and spontaneous than in her previous work.

Whether it be *Kaloune* or her earlier works, Aitkens pieces require an in-person experience to fully appreciate them. *Kaloune*'s concrete forms that jut out of walls seem to embolden the 3-dimensionality hinted at via photography and digital imagery. The constant push/pull between 3- and 2-dimensionality means *Kaloune* can oscillate between pictorial and sculptural space. Navigating around the physical works, results in infinite angles and perspectives that could only be possible in person. Although they recall much familiar abstract and formalist sculpture, Aitkens sculptures are enhanced through their seemingly constant change in appearance based on the viewers position in the gallery. Aitkens careful balancing of concrete planes requires viewers to access the works from multiple visual points. Contemplating each works dynamic geometry in person, visitors can attempt to recall similar forms and figures of art, architecture, and design. The works ability to both mimic and yet detach from familiar forms magnifies how the series investigates the opposite binaries of familiarity and singularity in art. Aitkens works plead to be accessed and activated in person, physically inhabiting the gallery environ.

Kaloune marks the first time that Aitkens work is exhibited fully on the walls. In integrating the artists visual syntax with the picture plane, the pieces can operate as both images and sculptures. They do not occupy the familiar middle ground of relief sculpture, but exist in both distinct realms simultaneously. They are obvious sculptures first, but can be viewed as pictures. Their placement on vertical planes does not diminish their physicality and spatial orientation. Since Aitkens practice of installation involves a playful eye and conscious exploration, the viewer must operate in new ways to activate

and experience each work. We are subtly pushed to not only examine the artworks head on, but also from the sides, bottoms, tops, and everything in-between.

Initially, Aitkens *Kaloune* series shows geometric abstract sculptures that borrow architectural structures. But through ambiguous forms, titles, digital vs. real imagery, and exhibition strategies, her works never comfortably dwell within the visitors various modes of explanation. Instead, Aitken works to resist our proclivity for intertextuality and contextualization, a difficult feat in our current era, in order to make room for more open-ended moments of direct undistracted experience. The difficulty of reading Aitkens works not only allows for a more nuanced viewing experience, but ultimately showcases the false veracity of her seemingly simple forms.

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JEN AITKEN received her MFA in 2014 from the University of Guelph, and her BFA in 2010 from Emily Carr University. In May 2016, she presented her first solo show at Battat Contemporary in Montreal, which was accompanied by a publication of her studio drawings. She created a site-specific solo exhibition at Centre Clark in September 2016 and has recently participated in group shows at Forest City Gallery in London, Ontario, Diaz Contemporary in Toronto, and Kamloops Art Gallery in British Columbia. Aitken is a Toronto-based artist and is represented by Battat Contemporary. Jen Aitken gratefully acknowledges the support of the Toronto Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.