

GO BACK
THE WAY
YOU CAME

EN



Kaari Upson knows only too well the looming sense of impending disaster that clings, like smoke-choked air, to her hometown of San Bernardino, California. Wildfires regularly eat up the landscape; it is a place of frequent earthquakes, recurring drought, high crime and “prickly dread,” as writer Joan Didion describes it. Upson’s all-American father and German émigré mother ended up there, raising the artist in a single-story home built in the ruinous county, shaded by a large ponderosa pine and surrounded by abandoned homes and vacant lots. Her very first artworks swirled around the figure of “Larry,” her Hugh Hefner-styled San Bernardino neighbor. Subsequent projects tackled the specter of her Pepsi Cola-obsessed mother, as well as consumer culture, and “Americanness” writ large. Her most recent body of works, created for this first European institutional solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, entails a return to her childhood home, zooming ever more closely into a trauma of origins that is as universal as it is particular.

Go Back the Way You Came: There are so many ways to understand the command that serves as Upson’s title. A hometown, a home, a mother—any of these could be said to be where each of us “came from,” and both home and mother connect in visceral ways, at least for Upson. She would remind you that we start symbiotically growing our bodies inside another (our first home), embedded in a life that is not our own. Between mother and child boundaries are permeable, cells shift from body to body, with no sense of delineation or property. This is not a metaphor: Years after a woman gives birth, scientists can locate the unique genetic material of her baby floating around her cellular structures. The child has become part of her body, and her body becomes part of the child. Kinship, it seems, is a form of contamination.

KUNSTHALLE
BASEL

30.8.–
10.11.2019

ROOM 4

1
Prairie Fundamentalism, 2019
 HD film, color, sound
 14 min 30 sec, in loop

2
A Place For a Snake, 2019
 HD film, color, sound
 7 min 1 sec, in loop

3
Howard, 2019
 HD film, color, sound
 1 min 49 sec, in loop

4
DAY COFFIN MONDAY, 2018–2019
DAY COFFIN TUESDAY, 2018–2019
DAY COFFIN WEDNESDAY, 2018–2019
DAY COFFIN THURSDAY, 2018–2019
DAY COFFIN FRIDAY, 2018–2019
DAY COFFIN SATURDAY, 2018–2019
DAY COFFIN SUNDAY, 2018–2019
 Resin
 Each approx. 14 × 78 × 61 cm

ROOM 3

1
Night Splitter, 2019
 HD film, color, sound
 15 min 49 sec, in loop

2
Urmutter, 2018–2019
 Wood
 218 × 20 × 30 cm, 205 × 20 × 30 cm

ROOM 2

O. Snag, 2018–2019
 Acrylic paint, wood
 6 sculptures, each approx.
 52 × 33 × 35 cm

ROOM 1

Mother's Legs, 2018–2019
 Pigment, urethane
 26 sculptures, each approx.
 213 × 20 × 30 cm
 Courtesy of the artist;
 Massimo de Carlo,
 Milan/London/Hong Kong;
 and Sprüth Magers,
 Berlin/London/Los Angeles

ROOM 5

1
Fireplace II, 2019
 Aluminum, aqua resin, urethane
 Approx. 313 × 236 × 5 cm

2
90°, 2017–2019
 Aluminum, aqua resin, urethane
 Approx. 250 × 146 × 127 cm

3
Diaphragm, 2018–2019
 Aluminum, aqua resin, urethane
 Approx. 17 × 62 × 57 cm

4
Him, 2017–2019
 Aluminum, aqua resin
 Approx. 230 × 72 × 29 cm

5
Bathtub, 2017–2019
 Aqua resin
 Approx. 203.2 × 147.3 × 85 cm

6
Corner, For Georges, 2017–2019
 Aluminum, aqua resin
 Approx. 250 × 168 × 110 cm,
 approx. 22.8 × 10 × 12 cm

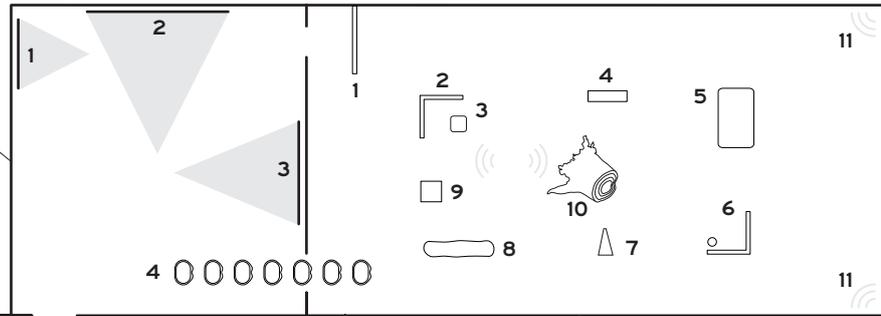
7
Standing, 2017–2019
 Aluminum, aqua resin
 Approx. 250 × 168 × 110 cm

8
Center, 2017–2019
 Aluminum, aqua resin
 Approx. 155 × 170 × 58 cm

9
Police, 2019
 Aqua resin
 Approx. 35 × 50 × 30 cm

10
Stump, 2017–2019
 Aqua resin
 Approx. 154.9 × 190.5 × 177.8 cm

11
Floorplan, 2019
 Sound
 11 min 28 sec, in loop



And this is where Upson's work invariably takes root: The site where intimacy meets repulsion, at that thin membrane between affinity and antagonism. To do so here, the artist literally eviscerates parts of her childhood environment. Cutting down, casting, and replicating the natural and architectural elements that she grew up in, Upson fuses not only self and other, but also body and object, desire and trauma. The gripping result interrogates the primordial meaning of the *Unheimliche* (uncanny), with its semantic core of *Heim*, or home, and its connection to things familiar-yet-strange.

The exhibition opens up into a forest of abstracted legs (although, perhaps, the ensemble might be better described as a freaky meat locker), cast from the termite-cratered wood of the massive tree the artist felled outside her family home. If kinship is a form of contamination, so, too, is creation a form of destruction. The exhibition's dangling limbs, painted in hues ranging from "baby" to sickly "fleshy" pink, reveal the contours of oversized knees, cast from Upson's own and those of her mother: To enter the gallery is to walk between this impressive expanse of *Mother's Legs*, as the artist calls them. Go back the way you came: pushed through an orifice and into the space between spread legs.

Several generations of women, or their evocations, inhabit the exhibition. In one room, six busts stand guard, three based on Upson's attempt to sculpt her mother's mother's face from memory, and three based on a childhood friend's endeavor to do the same for her own maternal grandmother. Each is cast, enlarged, and thickly painted by Upson to reflect the face of her mother, grandmother, or self, or that of her friend, or the friend's mother, or grandmother—their faces are then pressed into each other so that the paint smudges and melds. Ambiguous, unreliable portraits, each a multiplication of the "her" that populates the show, they stand as reminders of how mirrorings and slippages prevail in the particular brand of patriarchy that defines Upson's world.

Time, too, plays a vital role, figured not only through generational lineages, but also the passage between night and day (in the videos), the rings of a tree stump (visible in several sculptures), or through the colorful, oversized cast resin pill box-sculptures marked with the days of the week (laid out like Minimalist amulets). Mostly, though, it is signaled by compulsive repetitions and returns of what seem to be repressed memories structuring every artwork. The tree that shaded Upson's youth, material witness to those childhood memories, is destroyed to become artistic fodder:

Its stump, its fire-marked skin, and its disemboweled interior run through the show like connective tissue. It stars in *Night Splitter* (2019), one of the exhibition's several haunting videos featuring the artist (sometimes with her face painted as a grotesque double of herself) muttering and ranting in the landscape with gestures at once violent and tender, assaultive and erotic while the felled tree is being split into pieces. In another video, *A Place For a Snake* (2019), Upson appears disguised as her friend, and her friend appears disguised as the artist, wearing face paint, a wig, and Upson's clothes. Filmed in the artist's childhood bedroom, the two protagonists speak jolted, repeated lines, as if interminably narrating the chilling nonsense of a nightmare. As so often in Upson's practice, there is a strange symmetry to the various videos—each echoing, twinning, and warping the other. And none offers a reliable narrator since, across each of the recordings, Upson sometimes speaks as herself, her mother, her friend, and sometimes her friend speaks as herself or the artist. Subjectivity, with Upson, is, quite simply, multiple and unstable.

In the final room, elements of Upson's family home are on view, having been dissected and smeared with latex, they were dried and then skinned to make thin, flexible molds, which are cast again (monumental tree segments, but also a shower-bathtub or the façade of a fireplace). These might recall the latex works of the late Swiss artist Heidi Bucher (1926–1993), or even the solid house casts of the English sculptor Rachel Whiteread (*1963), but Upson's are imbued with a distinct psychic charge. In the context of her seemingly compulsive repetitions, these copies of a copy are a potentially endless reproduction of things that become like "daughters" of the original object, as the artist relates, aware of the irony in her choice of words. In making these works, Upson stretches and bends the interior elements of the home onto the ponderosa pine, then reverses and brings the pine into the home. The inside becomes outside; the outside enters the inside.

Sometimes propped beneath or around these hulking elements sit the casts of an arched right foot (Upson's mother's, missing as it is its big toe), the blanket knitted for the artist when she was a child, or other domestic intrusions, all the more disquieting for their casual but odd placement and scale in relation to the rest. Echoing through the room is a sound work featuring a high-pitched version of the artist's voice, recounting childhood memories connected to sites in the house and taking visitors on an anxious auditory tour of her absent home. Upson thus builds a monument to the home

she is losing (it having recently been sold), and which she has, in some ways, already lost by transitioning from child- into adulthood.

As she returns to San Bernardino, to her home, to her mother, and to store-bought things and hand-me-downs, as she casts and recasts them so often that their original form becomes unrecognizable, she asks: What does it mean to return to, and to make or do, the same thing over and over again? To relive the same experience time and again? Upson repeats herself, her mother, her objects, and her home, in an eternal return that aims to untangle who we are apart from the people and things and memories that made us.

Kaari Upson was born in 1972 in San Bernardino, US; she lives and works in Los Angeles, US.

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In parallel to the exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, the Kunstverein Hannover presents an extensive overview of Kaari Upson's previous work in her solo exhibition *DOOR, OPEN, SHUT* from 7.9.—17.11.2019.

GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German,
except on Sundays when the curator's tour takes place

Curator's tour with Elena Filipovic, in English
1.9.2019, Sunday, 3 pm
29.9.2019, Sunday, 3 pm

Guided tour, in English
7.11.2019, Thursday, 6:30 pm

EDUCATION/PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Children's workshop *Gruselgeschichten*
29.9.2019, Sunday, 3 pm
A tour and workshop for children aged 5–10 yrs.,
in German, by reservation only:
kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

In the Kunsthalle Basel library you will find a selection
of publications related to Kaari Upson.

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More information at kunsthallebasel.ch