

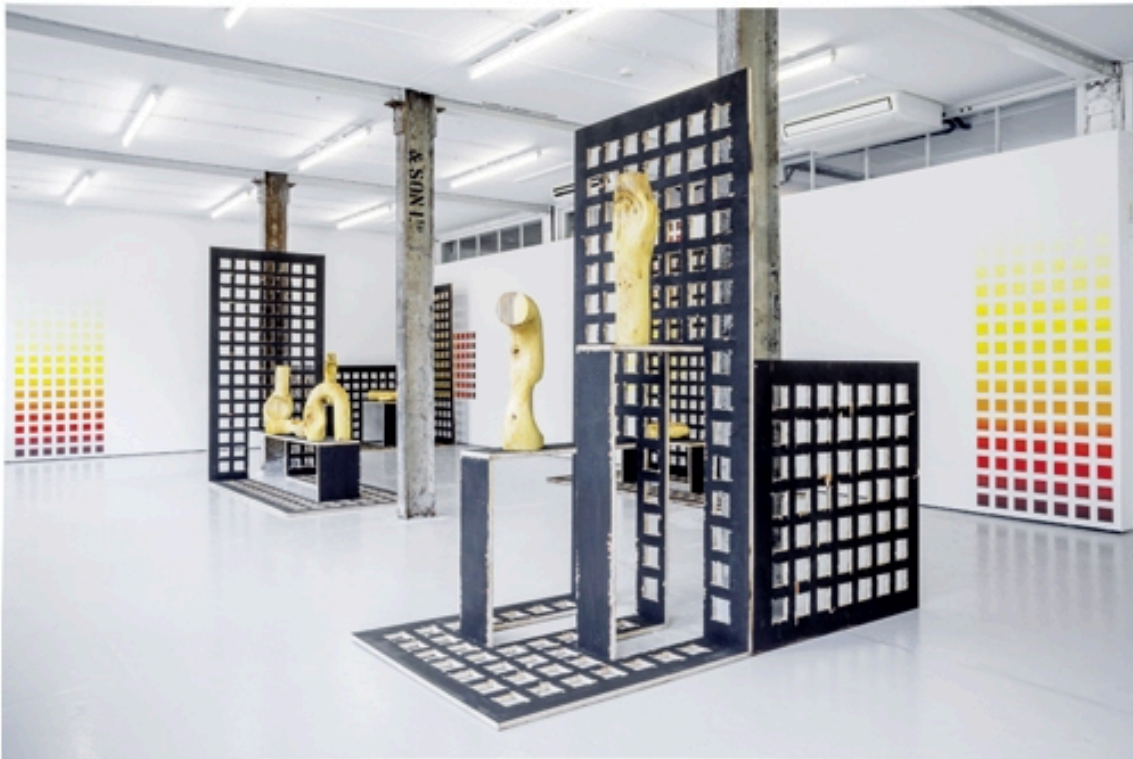
GLADSTONE GALLERY
frieze

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By Paul Teasdale

Claudia Comte

FOCUS

Shaping Up



Sharp Sharp, 2014, Installation view David Dale Glasgow, courtesy: the artist & David Dale Gallery, Glasgow

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A curious fact: When Jean Arp spoke in French he introduced himself as Jean and when he spoke in German he called himself Hans. When talking about the work of Berlin-based artist Claudia Comte, this kind of duality seems relevant, drawing as she does from two distinct landscapes from her childhood. Growing up in the small Swiss town of Grancy at the foot of the Jura mountain range near Lausanne, the area's dense forestry led her one day, while a student at the École cantonale d'art de Lausanne, to pick up a chainsaw and sculpt a slightly wonky cactus from a tree log. The cactus she made is the kind familiar from the rocky desert backdrop to the adventures of Wile E. Coyote and The Road Runner that the artist recalls being fascinated by as a child. If verdant Switzerland and the classic cartoon vista of America's Monument Valley form keys to Comte's practice, then it's an equally grand cast of Modernism's greats which inform her amorphous sculptures and experiments in abstract painting: not just Arp but spectres of Henry Moore, Constantin Brâncuși, Barbara Hepworth, Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset and John M. Armleder – along with any of the cast of *Looney Tunes*.

Comte's insouciance to her background and forebears leads her always site-specific installations to address architectural and design concerns just as readily as sculpture and painting. Using the possibilities created by the repetition and serialization of simple modular forms, her immersive wall paintings clash the formalism of Op art abstraction with a carefree twist on modernist sculpture and cartoon imagery.

For her exhibition at the Kunsthaus Biel in 2013, Comte arranged black and white paintings of googly cartoonish eyes along the walls: one pair stared directly out, another appeared cross-eyed, while one pair looked sidelong at yet another. Are these even eyes, or just two sets of circles, one inside the other? Such Rubin vase effects and illusionistic sleight of hand play out throughout Comte's work; simple shapes morph and move: sometimes figurative, sometimes merely decorative. This malleability of forms is a key concern for the artist. For her 2013 solo at BolteLang in Zurich a circle reappeared, split in two, and displayed in the window spelling out the artist's initials 'C C'. In the artist's 2010 book *Welcome to Colorful*, these semicircles appear again, pages of them: facing right, flipped on their side, reversed. Here they become the simplest of cartoon ciphers before melding into signage, then to background wallpaper.

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Sculpture Object 18, 2013, Oak sculpture on burnt MDF panel, 66 × 38 × 18 cm & 250 × 125 cm. Courtesy: the artist & BolteLang, Zürich. Photography: Annik Wetter

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Sculpture Object 18, 2013, Oak sculpture on burnt MDF panel, 72 × 18 × 13 cm & 250 × 125 cm. Courtesy: the artist & BolteLang, Zürich. Photography: Annik Wetter

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Processes of sequenced repetition, through colour as well as form, act as the starting point for Comte's immersive wall pieces. Take the Charlie Brownesque zig-zag she moiréd across the walls in her Kunsthaus Biel exhibition or the gridded tequila sunrise colour fades – from maroon, through red, orange and yellow and finally disappearing into the white of the walls – in her recent show at David Dale gallery in Glasgow. The colour grids mimicked the tessellated design of burnt wooden panels that the artist meticulously cut small squares out of and used as both backdrop and support for her sculptures. The panels recall simple trellis fences found in suburban gardens but one could equally cite the designs of onetime local architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh.



Eye to eye, 2013, Installation view, Kunsthaus Biel. Courtesy: the artist & BolteLang, Zürich. Photography: Annik Wetter

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If her earlier all-wall Op art concerns have calmed to more sparing abstraction, Comte's sculptures too have developed from her first rough cactus attempt. Though still carved using a chainsaw, her sculptures are now sanded, buffed and oiled to a slick finish. Working from drawings or modelling clay, the artist invents playfully dextrous forms, from the totemic Moore-esque lumber of the titular works in her 2013 show *Big Bob, his square friend, and their diamond totem* at Forum de Genève, Geneva (the artist often names her biomorphic sculptures after the crew members involved in their installation) to the Brâncusi-inspired totems in in her 2012 show *No Lemon No Melon* at Tripode, Nantes. This presentation straddled the line somewhere between the dark mysteriousness of an ethnographic museum and the light-hearted raspberry of forms popping out from a row of cuckoo clocks. Of late, her sculptures have become even more pared down – simple cylindrical forms, knots, wilting spoon-like trophies – but they continue to be presented en masse: a troupe of silent actors in motionless repose.

Animation took on a more literal form for her project *Tornado Kit* (2014), included in the exhibition *Elevation 1049.2* earlier this year. Comte crafted large, lightweight sculptures from Styrofoam in a typically trans-modernist range of bulky shapes and sprayed them with a coating of the hardening resin Polyurea. These were then used to populate a board game she fabricated into an ice rink in the town of Gstaad. Using the local ice hockey team, the artist gave orders over the PA system to the players, who moved the sculptures around the rink as the game unfolded. Afterwards, alone, the sculptures looked vaguely tectonic – like the rock formations from Monument Valley. A solitary ice resurfacer moved slowly around them, the only sound a plaintive 'beep, beep'.

—by *Paul Teasdale*

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