

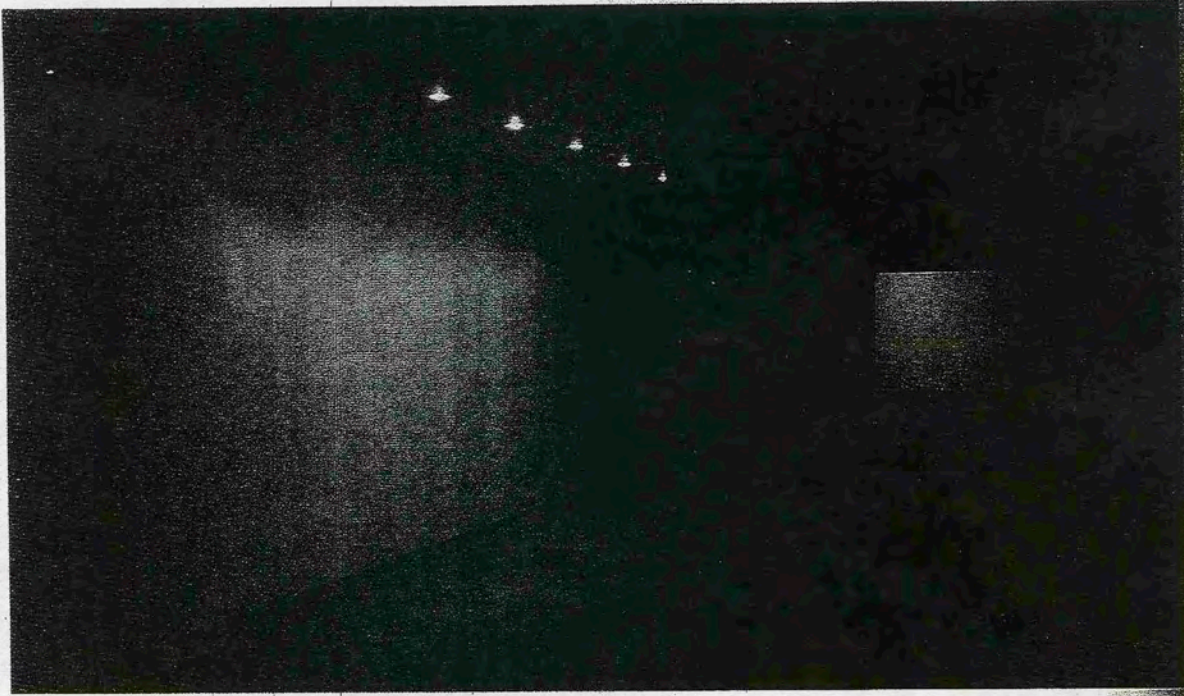
GLADSTONE GALLERY

Clancy, Luke, "Miroslaw Balka: Tristes Tropiques," *Art Review*, February 2008, pg. 126

MIROSLAW BALKA: TRISTES TROPIQUES

IRISH MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, DUBLIN
14 NOVEMBER - 27 JANUARY

Kategorie, 2005 (installation view, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin), colour threads and rotors, tunnel from plaster board and metal brackets, 208 x 221 x 600 cm. Photo: Denis Mortell. Courtesy the artist and Jopling/White Cube, London.



Members of the *Calliphoridae* family, known to their admirers as blowflies or bluebottles, like to lay their eggs on carrion, or indeed faeces, thereby offering emerging maggots a ready supply of vital nutrition. More importantly *Calliphoridae* enjoy a life cycle that progresses from egg to larvae to the mature individual by way of, every now and then, a stopover in the realm of fine art, having enlivened work by Damien Hirst and also played a formative role in the sentimental education of Cornelia Parker.

For Miroslaw Balka it has to be *Calliphora vicina* – see, there it is, right there in the description for the Polish artist's 215 x 135 x 60 (2005): 'steel, *Calliphora vicina* maggots'. What is not stipulated, but with which the room housing the work – a pair of large circular receptacles inside of which writhe several kilos of maggots – has been equipped, are a couple of heavy transparent plastic fly curtains (to prevent any escapees) and a glowing electric fly-killer (should a specimen make it through the plastic cordon).

It's a practical setup, as unavoidably chilling in its thoroughness as it is apparent in its import. Balka is the epitome of an 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' kind of artist – and not just because he incorporates ashes (along with rust and salt) into many of his sculptural pieces. Entering his IMMA retrospective is like entering a landscape of grey snow; colour is all but banished, as is glimmer, shine and any trace of humour.

The surfaces of things here are crumbling, caked or already powder. Balka draws a hard line around fluids, encases and traps them as much as possible, pursuing not the forces that animate, but the materials left behind,

which presumably explains why the most pertinent aspect of his work always seems to be the material rather than the forms, which tend not just towards dry and minimal, but meticulously desiccated.

In several videoworks and some recent sculptures, live elements, sound and even movement are included. *Kategorie* (2006), a corridor hung with five coloured pieces of thread, each suspended from its own slowly rotating motor, has a twitchy force that is aided by the insubstantiality of the piece, while his *Hanging Soap Woman* (2000), with its collateral of used soap bars threaded on a long string hanging in a lazy curve, reignites a sense of collectivity that recalls Christian Boltanski.

Both pieces (along with several others in the show which make even more pointed references) evoke the legacy of Balka's homeland, and the camps at Treblinka, decommissioned only ten years before the artist was born. For all the specificity in these more recent works, however, their import seems to broaden out. It is not simply that all of us, under the correct form of pressure, whether that be waterboarding or the action of *Calliphora vicina*, are destined to become a chemical flour. It is also, and more importantly, that each human form is always under attack from something that tends to reduce, wear away or compress; and sometimes the reassuring inevitability of that very force offers the welcome and only challenge to rationalised extermination. *Luke Clancy*