

ST. GALLEN, SWITZERLAND

Bethan Huws

KUNSTMUSEUM ST. GALLEN

Over the years, Bethan Huws has followed a consistently meandering course; she has moved between England and Wales, and her work has encompassed images, buildings, objects, talks, and film. The manifest variety of her artistic expression has produced an all-encompassing topography of reflection on the location of a work of art, the role of the artist, and different ways to think about art. Since childhood, Huws has created small boats out of dried reeds, a local tradition in Wales, where the artist grew up. These tiny objects reappear as a motif in a series of watercolors and texts. In this exhibition, for the first time, dozens of these boats were displayed together; in two vitrines the boats were lined up in a row, while in a third, this order dissolved into loose piles. When does a simple gesture become a work of art? What is the relationship of such a "found gesture" to the readymade? Toward what horizons of meaning are we pointed through the movements of a blade of grass through space? What changes with the gradual accumulation of boats over the years?

"Piss off I'm/a fountain!" This riposte, directed at Duchamp and Nauman, is to be found in *Untitled*, 2004, one of Huws's many "word vitrines" present in two rooms in St. Gallen: White plastic letters inserted into lined black backgrounds inside glass-fronted aluminum cases. Language, displayed in three dimensions, sets off a playful interchange with the idea of the readymade: Are we readers or viewers? Concept and materiality are no longer in opposition when the word has become an object and when thought is conveyed through objects. *Argon*, 2006, a blue neon bottle rack, moves Duchamp one step further toward immateriality. At Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht—where this show, the first large retrospective of Huws's work, opened—the lit bottle rack was slightly elevated on a low pedestal; like the large floor piece in that museum's last room, this pedestal duplicated the wood flooring in a precisely measured area, introducing a barely perceptible difference into the space. In St. Gallen, two of Huws's films, *Singing for the Sea*, 1993, and *The Chocolate Bar*, 2006, were projected in succession on a large screen in the museum's biggest hall. This approach worked particularly well for the latter film: In an early scene, two characters (both played by Welsh actor Rhys Ifans) have a moment of comedic miscommunication when one refers to the Mars candy bar and the other thinks he means the planet Mars; in the final scene, a third character (Ifans again) consumes the chocolate in such an ecstatic, almost cannibalistic, manner that the cosmic confusion begins to actually make sense.

Accompanying the watercolors was a new piece not shown in Maastricht: *Table of Feathers*, 2007, a simple wooden table covered with a forest of feathers stuck into the tabletop. The quill table is more than a surrealist still life; it evokes the gesture of writing without words, as many of Huws's watercolors do through their scriptlike markings. The exhibition produced a space for thought, in which each individual work opened up a way to understand the others.



Bethan Huws, *Boats*, 1983–2006, dried reeds. Installation view.

—Hans Rudolf Reust
Translated from German by Jane Brodie.