

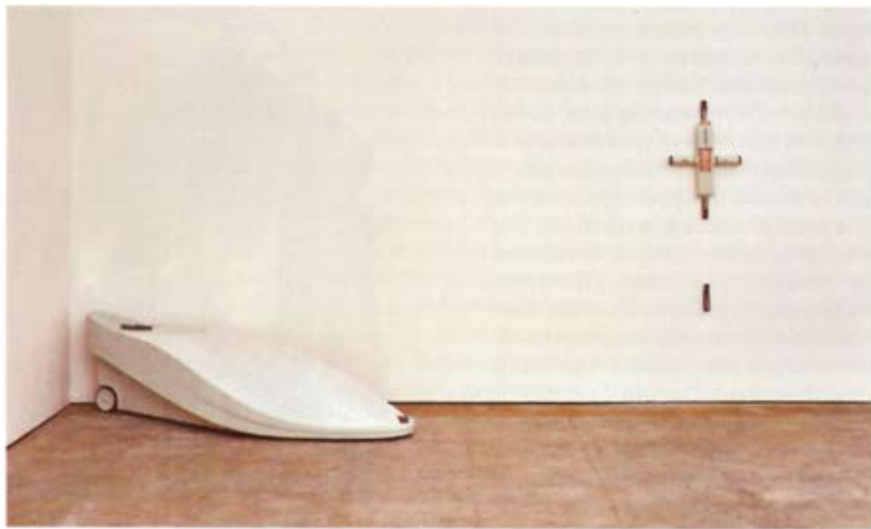
SAN FRANCISCO

## Camille Blatrix

CCA WATTIS INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Camille Blatrix's equivocal objects seem borne from some familiar future—a yet-to-arrive moment about which we are already inexplicably melancholic. They recall the technological effluences of a bygone era: phone booths, ticket kiosks, radios, speakers, and related apparatuses intended to streamline transmission and transformation. And the works do travel, if only via the ahistorical narratives they drum up in their viewer. A font might recall the logo of a long-obsolete brand from one's childhood, or a curve the Art Nouveau brooch worn by one's grandmother. Often Blatrix's works appear to drip or drag, as though caught inhabiting several instants in their trajectory simultaneously. In a cultural moment that nurtures fixations on the (often violent) ruptures and accelerations of time and space that new technologies might make possible—think of the virtual realities of Oculus Rift or of the television series *Black Mirror*—Blatrix makes a case for subtler displacements.

View of "Camille Blatrix," 2016. From left: *Whast*, 2016; *Soul*, 2016. Photo: John White.



Though the artist's sculptures appear to have emerged seamless and fully formed, each is patiently fabricated—hand-carved, welded, and painted—its most intricate detail personally tended to. Blatrix is adept at making his hand invisible. The works maintain a strong lineage of Surrealism: They have something of Jean Arp's smooth biomorphism

and of Robert Gober's heady ambiguity. But a straight, painterly shot from René Magritte to Konrad Klapheck also brings us to Blatrix, in that he renders objects that seem, at first, innocuous yet are psychically charged. He translates to three dimensions what Klapheck achieved with paint; the works themselves have a similar sensitivity to the affective impact of a minor exaggeration in form or loosening of line. But where the painter's brawny typewriters and sewing machines were concerned with, as Dieter Roelstraete has described, "machine-induced forgetting" in the context of Germany's postwar reconstruction, Blatrix's scope is more general, though perhaps equally pernicious in effect: He reckons with the impact of machines on human emotion, and vice versa.

"Heroe," Blatrix's first solo institutional show in the United States, offered a sparse, impressionistic narrative driven by an obsession with cleanliness and maintenance. In lieu of the painted illustrations tucked into his previous works, we saw sterile, authoritative forms that seemed poised to perform unknown tasks involving measurement, monitoring, diagnostics, and deep cleaning. Installed at the gallery entrance was *Locker* (all works 2016), a narrow vertical form painted robin's-egg blue with a warm gray strip down its center. A single circle of sterling-silver hardware is placed at the object's center, and a small white button installed to its left seems to correspond with whatever its function may be. *Soul*, a cruciform shape made of what looked like mop handles and surrounded by four small ocular devices mounted to surrounding walls twenty inches from the ground, called to mind objects as disparate as a level and an explosive device. The installation's dominant element was *Whast*, a motorized Hoover-cum-whale, opalescent the way most Conair products were in the 1980s, which lurched in the gallery's corner, where it rammed itself incessantly into a wall. It sat in silence for a moment before revving and impotently thrusting. For all of the allusions to high tech here, this Sisyphean choreography was the show's only performance.

In dreams, we are incapable of reading: We might recognize symbols, but we are unable to synthesize or make sense of them. All told, Blatrix's scenographic exhibition similarly placed the viewer in the frustrating position of trying to decipher an illegible code. It struck me that this effect was an amplification of the ways in which most of us relate to quotidian technologies; though we are familiar, even intimate with our computers, we don't understand the mechanics and codes on which they operate. Yet rather than underscore what might be threatening about this dynamic, the artist seemed keen to make his spaces of disjuncture palatable. I thought of Gertrude Stein musing on objects in *Tender Buttons*: "A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading."

—Annie Godfrey Larmor