

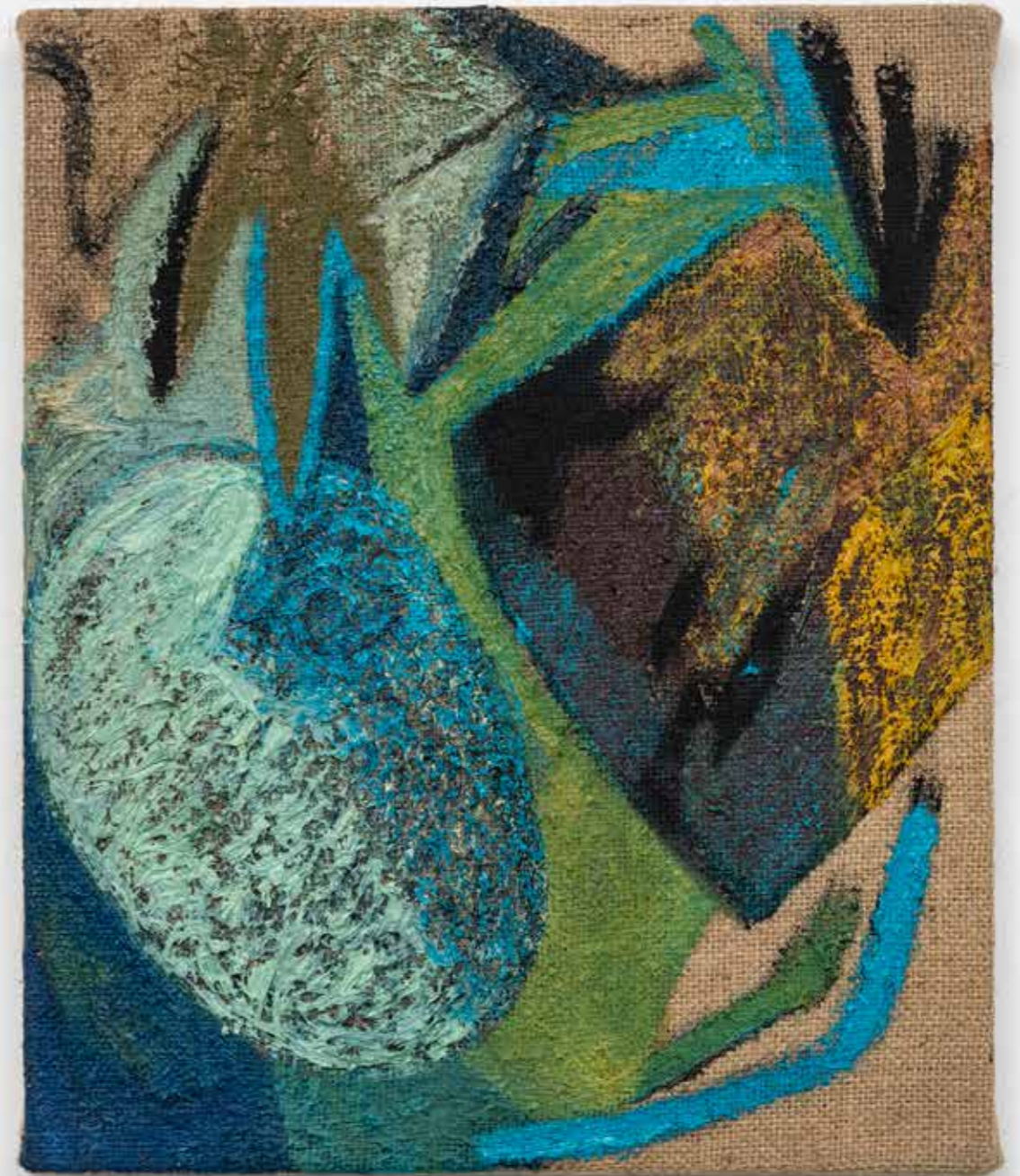
Play It Again: Karolina Albricht's Recent Paintings

by Scott McCracken

Karolina Albricht's paintings have a capacity to contort their own space, splintering into mismatched, often competing areas. Each shape takes up one assumed position among many, where the awkward angularity of shard-like appendages penetrates through a nebulous sub-terrain. In works such as *Eyeball Straight* and *Knuckle Rotation*, the spatial relationships between elements are distinct and intelligible; forms and planes interact and overlap into a readable positive and negative space. And yet negative space is never treated as inactive space. It is always positively charged. It carries and sustains the painting over the entire surface plane, into each of the four corners, along each of the four sides and, sometimes, even extending across its own edge. Other pictures are altogether more spatially amorphous where we are presented with camouflaged forms and indeterminate textures spread out equally over the entirety of the surface.

In *No-Face Floating*, a lithe and stickly orange 'branch' extends diagonally from the top edge of the picture, quickly dissolving and disappearing behind some orthogonal shape composed of short, sharp, black flickering marks of charcoal and oil stick. Veils of translucent paint are contrasted with built-up abrasions, forming unified passages that lead us from one point of the painting to another. These routes of travel are sometimes straightforward, sometimes turbulent. *No Face Floating*, like many of Albricht's works, is situated somewhere between a terrain and an atmosphere; of something that has to be traversed but at the same time submerges us into a compacted and condensed space. Airless.

These are pictures that take their time to materialise. There is a slow, almost geological build-up of matter, adhering into a Frankenstein's Monster-type assemblage, patchworked together from innumerable parts. This agglomeration of substances includes not only paint (and its handling), but also pumice, hair, sand and bits of discarded studio detritus. It creates a surface that is dense, coarse and scarred. We are presented with different consistencies; hard (like bone or enamel), stretched (like tendons), taut (like musculature). Bodily references are also to be found in the titling of the works: *Abductor Straight*, *Kneecap North*, *Spleen Roll*. Paintings that have torn out their own vitals and then stitched themselves back together, embodying a type of reanimation, where each individual part is given a necessary role to play in how these function as paintings – through a vital excess.



Eyeball Straight, 2020. oil, sand on jute, 30 x 26cm



The smaller works appear to be able to withstand more attack. These are pictures that have been relentlessly 'hit', again and again. And hit hard. It is only through these continuous strikes that they have developed a 'thicker' skin. A skin that is blistered, grazed and calloused, one that has fortified itself against such assaults. They have a resistance and a stamina. An endurance. The smaller paintings bear the brunt of a targeted aggression, a forcefulness that has been channelled into a pictorial and material form. Evidently these hits are not random, but strategic. Across this group of paintings, Albricht's formula of juxtaposing anatomical parts with specific actions, manoeuvres or Cardinal directions renders these titles as instructions to be followed, as physical movements or locatable positions alluding to exercise poses, dance moves and surgical procedures. As we look at them and consider their respective titles, we start to identify how the depicted forms are enacting these instructions as we, simultaneously, envisage our own bodies, our own limbs, engaging in similar acts.

While the titles are amusing in their own right, the paintings themselves have an underlying sense of humour that filters through only after sustained looking. Understated humour in overstated paintings. It's not immediately obvious but nothing about these paintings is obvious. That's their point. *Soft Dock* is an example of where the painting's innate sense of humour is more forthrightly conveyed; the trailing 'golden hair' that skirts along the left edge of the canvas while the red-lipped letter-box shaped mouth, an orifice, could excrete, swallow or inhale at any moment.

From within the paintings themselves, and as viewers from outside, there is an unabating desire – and temptation - for touch. The tactility indirectly points towards a type of intimacy; there are indications of the sexual and the erotic but this is never made entirely explicit. What is explicit is that everything we see has been handled, moved, felt. All of the works possess quite subtle, tender moments of painterly facture. These are paintings that have been committed to and, through this uncompromising commitment, something is slowly revealed. Professing and confessing all at once, they are propelled by a haptic (and visual) curiosity. In *Upward, Not Northward* and *Some Come Up* isolated tapered extremities, possibly fingers or claws, float through their interior space. All the elements circulate around each other, closing in on the centre - a point of pressure within the painting.

While looking at Albricht's work, our focus is not only on the surface of the painting, but above it and around its perimeter. Philip Guston and Charline von Heyl have each made remarks about the space in front of the picture plane. In the case of von Heyl, she describes paintings as hovering in front of themselves. A similar thing is happening in Albricht's paintings, where the interiority of the picture distends, spilling outwards as well as laterally. Collaged canvas creeps over the edge, breaking the conventional rectilinear ground



Eyelid Flaking, 2020. oil on panel, 30 x 24cm

suggesting the thing we are looking at is only a fragment of something larger. These irregular edges reinforce the surface as something approaching a slab, or a tablet, that bears a lively interplay between drawn inscription and pure material sensation. In the larger paintings, such as *Upward, Not Northward*, *Soft Dock* and *No Face Floating*, areas of exposed jute, are left untreated, occasionally collaged on top, providing Albricht the opportunity to continually have her paintings be in a state of flux, where any pictorial decision or move made can be countered and played again.

There is a fullness to these works. A fullness that satiates our appetite for when we look at a painting. Often it is the case that overworked (and underworked) paintings are just a different type of 'worked' and this seems to be the territory that Albricht's paintings occupy. Their vitality, dynamism and this sense of fullness, finely tuned across both the diminutively scaled paintings and larger works, often comes directly from this excess, from being overloaded and continuously reworked. In other instances, it is not through excess, but through an adamant restraint that the resolved paintings emerge. We can compare these paintings to that of a crucible. Rather than being the typical metal vessel, however, these crucibles are flat planes and, although their materials are not being subjected to extreme temperatures, there is still a sense of melding, of transmutability, of fusion. A place where elements are forged into some new and unexpected arrangement of shape, colour and surface. Crucible also has another definition; it is a trial or a test of faith. Albricht's paintings are an affirmation of such a test, of submitting oneself to a specific process, one that relies on an openness to possibility, to be willing to take the paintings to their breaking point in the pursuit of constructing something that has real weight, solidity and potency.