

over view

Entering Henrike Daum's studio in Berlin's hip district Mitte is like entering a cabinet of curiosities: the light is dimmed and, while adjusting the eyes to the darkness, one catches glimpses of moving images, shimmering objects and other not immediately ascertainable sensations in the twilight. When you step closer, you may identify jellyfishes glowing in jam jars, a ladybird making its way around the edge of a glass or shiny mountains with luminous spots dancing over them.

The artist is fascinated by light in its manifold aspects, by materials and objects that reflect, radiate, and illuminate. So it has come only naturally that Henrike Daum (born 1972 in Gütersloh, Germany, lives and works in Berlin), during her studies at the art academy in Münster (Germany) and in her becoming an artist, has been turning towards video as the ideal medium for her artistic investigations. Yet it's not actually the medium or material itself which Daum wants to explore – it's rather that light and motion are used for examinations of all kinds of phenomenon, usually linked to science or natural sensations in general.

For example, the 'Moon Jellyfish' (2009) consists of test objects – three jellyfishes are kept in three jam jars, one standing on the other two on a plinth. After a while of watching them, one realizes that the jellyfishes move in different rhythms, the two small ones at the bottom move around their own axes, the bigger one at the top contracts slightly up and down. Their movements are not random, instead they perform something like a choreography (a simple one but, hey, they are jellyfishes). It takes some moments to realize that the sea creatures are not real but projected from behind onto the glasses – interestingly, that doesn't make them less real than the jellyfishes one encounters while swimming in the sea, since unseizable slipperiness is a part of these particular beings' nature. So, here we have this experimental set-up of sorts which only very ostensibly pretends to be meant for a scientific purpose. The order of the jars, the small ballet the jellyfishes dance, the mystic lightning, all these lead one quickly, and cheerfully, away from the arrangement for a scholarly experiment. Science serves here as the basis for a playful way of investigating light, form, and motion.

Henrike Daum's cabinet of curiosities

BARBARA J SCHEUERMANN

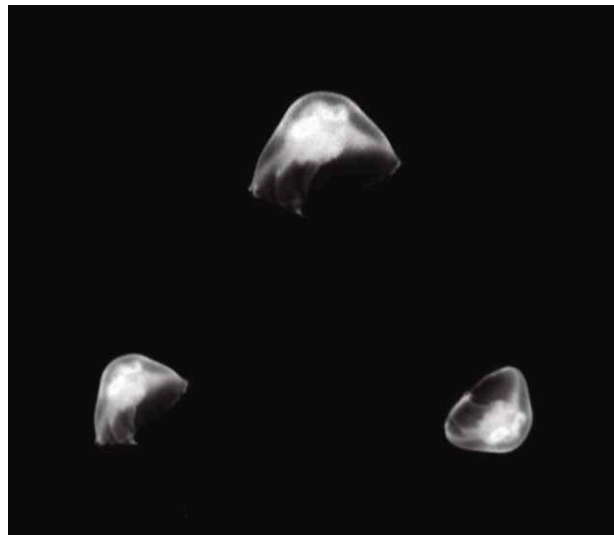


Ladybird, Installation.





Moon Jellyfish, Installation.
Below: A still from Moon Jellyfish.





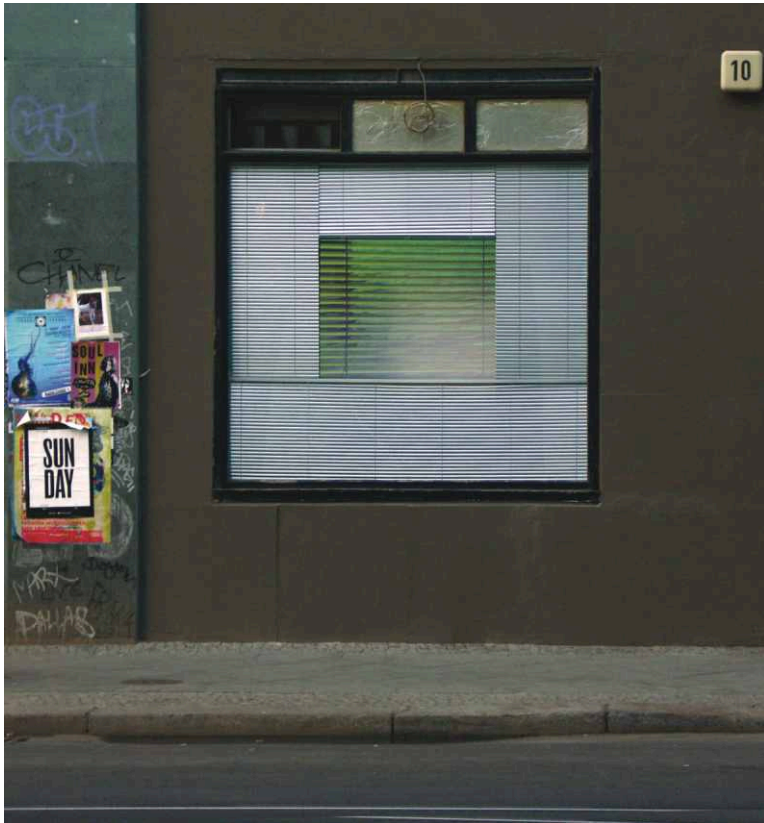
Detail of *Externsteine*.

Below
Externsteine, Installation.

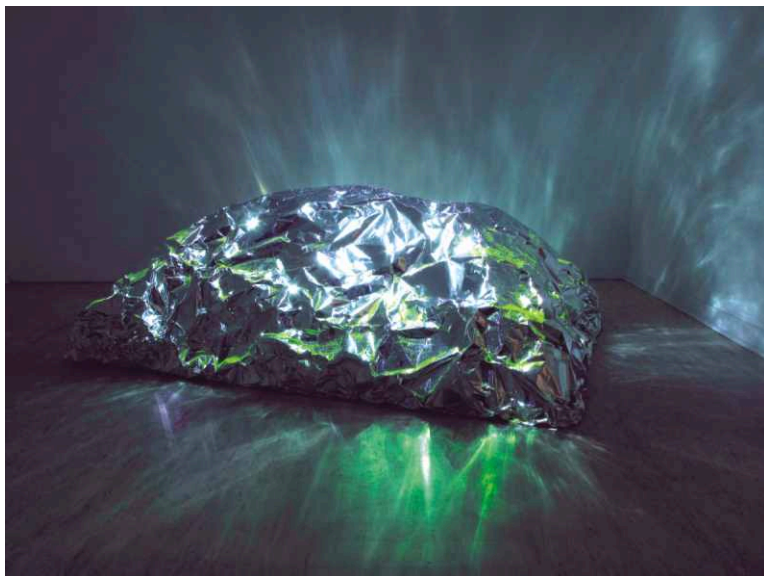
The method of projecting a moving image onto a small object is something which the artist has been using more often recently. These little glowing things are in the first place the ones which make the studio appear as a cabinet of curiosities or a dream lab. The 'Lady-bird' (2009) is another example of this technique: the set-up consists of a drinking glass on a plinth. Looking into the glass one sees a ladybird with the characteristic black dots on its back crawling around the edge of the glass. It seems to find its way very resolutely, regardless the fact that it doesn't lead to any where, just around the edge in never-ending circles. Through the pseudo-scientific set-up this actually marginal incident gets a new importance and becomes a metaphor for the cycle of life.

Henrike Daum is not afraid of using highly reduced compositions for making her point. On the contrary, this reduction seems to become one of the main objectives of her work and she is on her way of gaining mastery in it. If the historical trajectory of Modernist formalist reductivism is about making rigorous attempts at organizing aesthetic elements, she constructs a space where bare life-forms are evoked as primary lessons in phantasm which life itself proffers. Beginning from the elemental she slowly inches towards the numin-





Houseboat, Installation.



Alumountain, Installation.

ous, creating a wide compass that defeats the technology of her representation. Take for example 'Houseboat' (2010) – the first thing one encounters is a rather abstract image of horizontal grey lines with a kind of liquid, reflecting motion onto the plates. The three vertical lines give a hint that what we see is a sunblind. The title 'Houseboat' provides a cue to the location. In fact, it's the view of the sea through the slats of a jalousie. It's a found image, and not even an extraordinarily uncommon one, but by taking it out of its context the artist directs the viewer's attention to its mere structure, to its pattern, the reflection, the tension between stillness and movement, and the



Detail of Houseboat.

different layers of the composition. Originally, 'Houseboat' was installed in Berlin, in a shop window, framed with sunblinds, to be watched from the outside so that the view of the inside of the building was partly denied, but in the centre pulled into the sunlit waves of the sea – inside/outside, in front/behind, and real/unreal were utterly and beautifully interlocked.

Conceptualizing herself as an explorer and observer, Henrike Daum is intrigued by all kinds of sciences, discoveries, phenomena, sensations, and serendipities. She collects information, knowledge, and stories and loves to be completely soaked into a certain theme or subject matter, preferably something which links science with new technology and utopian ideas. The research, reading, talking with experts and wannabe-experts is a part of the work, and Daum enjoys the artistic freedom to treat proven facts and implausible arguments equally. So it's no surprise that a legend like the one around the 'Externsteine' in the German region of Teutoburger Wald finds her interest. The Externsteine were a centre of religious activity for the Teutonic peoples and their predecessors prior to the arrival of Christianity in northern Europe. Some Neo-pagans continue to believe that the legendary Saxon sanctum Irminsul was located at the Externsteine. And, of course, they also have been of interest to various German nationalist movements. No wonder that Henrike Daum feels highly attracted to this momentous place and has created several works around the Externsteine using their history as well as their inner and outer formation or their sheer manifestation in the space. For her there is no difference between reality and fantasy, what counts is the beauty, or the quaintness, of her findings which she then transform into these peculiar, mysterious installations and objects.

Leaving Henrike Daum's studio is leaving with the satisfying feeling that one carries home lots of unexpected insights, strange sensations, and enriching encounters – and the pleasant anticipation of the next visit to the cabinet of curiosities.

*View Henrike Daum's work, including samples of her videos, on her website:
www.henikedaum.de*

BARBARA J SCHEUERMANN is a Berlin-based curator and writer.