

Derya Akay: Material Hangings, Hangouts

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Number 108, Fall 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/72475ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Nuttle, R. (2014). Derya Akay: Material Hangings, Hangouts. *Espace*, (108), 48–53.



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An Interview by Rupert Nuttle

Derya Akay's work begins at the point where medium distinctions—familiar terms such as sculpture, photography, painting or installation—dissolve, intermingle and flavour one another. The languages of cooking and gardening—open-endedness, warmth and socialization—characterize Akay's approach to art-making. As a result, the confines of the traditional gallery space fade away, and the meandering networks of memory, trace and collective experience take over. Oscillating between a strong situational awareness on the one hand (manifested in works such as *Banff Blues* and *Gardenstrasse* that blend social experiment and documentation), and an equally strong material awareness on the other (the glazed ceramic Blobs, or the ongoing Scans, for example), Akay negotiates the philosophical interstices between art-as-object and art-as-event.

Rupert Nuttle: The tendency toward the provisional is what I find most interesting in your work. Your objects maintain a fluid reciprocity with their immediate surroundings. I'm thinking of *Banff Blues*, for instance, or the rooftop *Gardenstrasse*, both of them shifting constellations, which took place outside the gallery. How would you situate these works/actions relative to the traditional exhibition model and its investment of value in the art object as such?

Derya Akay: *Banff Blues* came out of a residency I was doing at the Banff Centre in 2010. On one of the first days, as we were taken on a tour around the Centre, I came across a blue chroma key curtain. I initially borrowed the curtain for a still life, but then realized how large it was and decided to cover the whole studio with it. So for the duration of my residency, the blue curtain became a background for every surface it covered and object placed on it. Its effects inspired me, the way it transformed objects that were displayed on it. It became an installation in retrospect, through its documentation. The studio was this large surface where the remains of an event or a party could be documented. I would spend hours going through the mess of the studio and re-think certain arrangements, photograph them, study them to create an archive of documentation. I have never shown this work in any kind of exhibition, and still don't actually know how to display it. It never quite existed as a sculpture, photograph or an installation.



Derya Akay, *Banff Blues* (2010), 35 mm film. Courtesy the artist and The Apartment, Vancouver.



Derya Akay, *Gardenstrasse*, (collaboration with Julia Feyrer, 2012), medium format positive film. Courtesy the artist and The Apartment, Vancouver.

Gardenstrasse fits right in there too. It was created in collaboration with Julia Feyrer, and there were many people involved. Julia had previous experience in constructing a social space in her *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* project, and for *Gardenstrasse* we managed to get the roof space from our friend who runs the Dunlevy Snackbar in Chinatown. It became a hangout spot for our social circle, and these hangouts would turn into making food from the garden. It was also a workspace for many people and a “lightweight” sculpture garden. It allowed for messy projects, sunfades, cyanotypes, sand art, clothes drying, thinking, playing with the earth, chess.... It also had autonomy, as it was a combination of living things under the natural elements. It was an exhibition in itself, with various objects, sculptures and gestures. In the end it became a series of photographs, a 16 mm film, a collection of sculptures, as well as dried plants, seeds and a potential book.

Both these works situate my interest in the documentation process, and how it influences and inevitably replaces the actions that form a project. *Gardenstrasse* now exists through its documentation, but it was a project that so many others were involved in, which is what gives it its lasting value. It's quite hard to transfer these actions into a gallery setting, because in so many cases actions become re-enactments, fabrications, staged events, prescriptions and so on. I think it's more relevant to the actions of these projects to transform the idea of the gallery into the project's documentation, a continuation of its modes of presentation, such as books, photographs, films, memories, tastes, experiences. The documentation really has a functional purpose of being able to make sense of and build upon the project in retrospect. It's important to me that these projects continue to happen in different forms and grow over time; a new version could exist again in the future with an improved and expanded mandate. The multiple forms of documentation exist as closure for one project and open a path for the next.

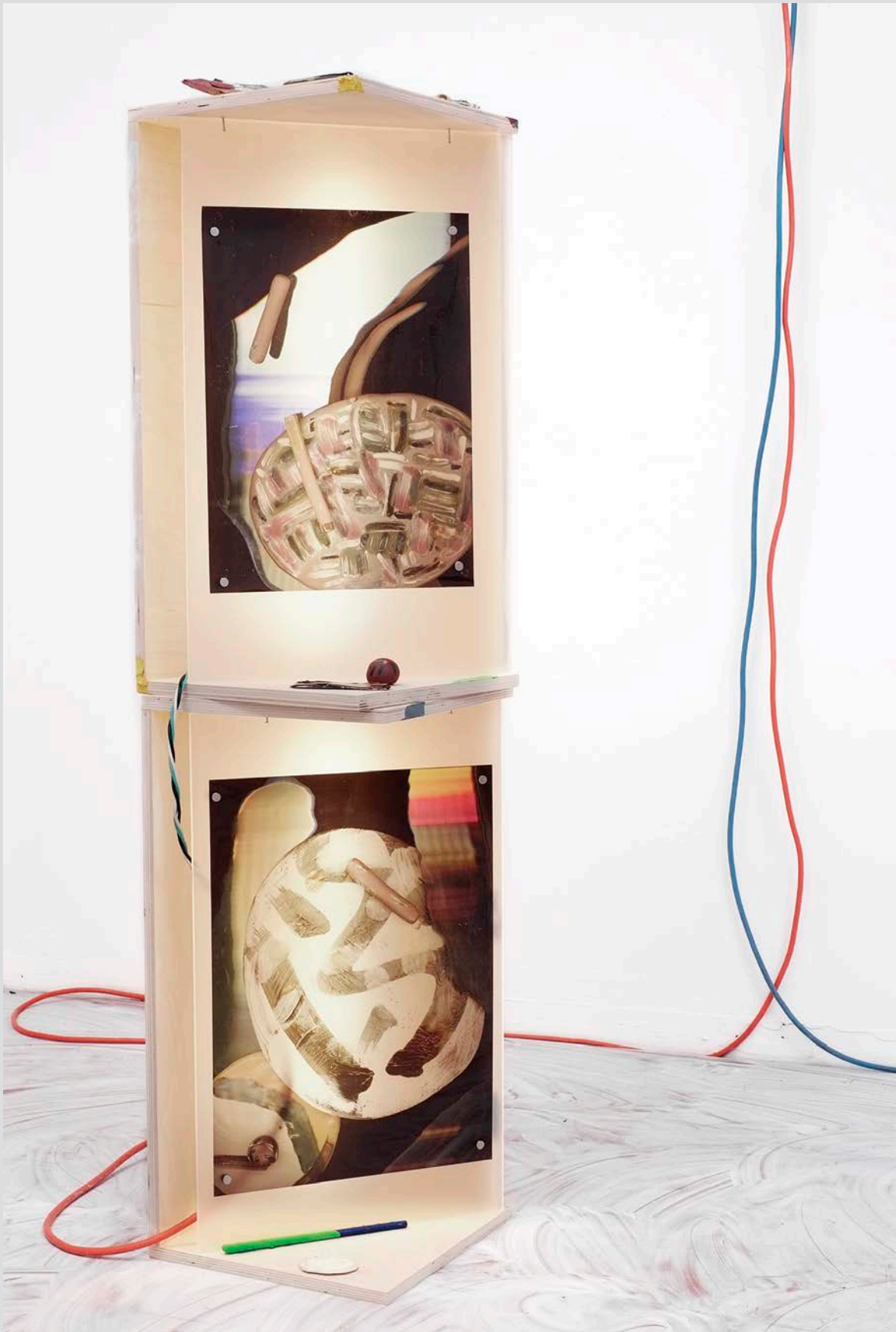
Turning to your Blobs, which, for me, are like material condensations of so many different elements—gestures, attitudes, histories and so on. How did these very painterly works come about?

Blobs started with ceramics. It was initially about creating a surface to experiment with colour and texture, with different combinations of glazes and slips. Blobs encompass all of my gestural and painterly experiments. The application of these slips and glazes were usually done with my hand directly, or with a brush. Glazing introduced me to painting in my practice, and the hand has played an important role. I'm interested in dexterity and the cultivation of the hand's own mind. I've come to see the relationship between hand and tool; the tool is created by the hand only to later serve as its extension. Through practice and cultivation the hand learns to work independently from the mind, and the things created reflect the time taken to learn the technique that forms the object—and the numerous extraneous thoughts the maker ponders upon. Blobs have made me think about how intuition functions in decision-making; they have enabled me to exercise my intuition in my work. As the ceramic medium is very process-based, there is a lot of room to observe these intuitive decisions and their effects. In most cases, the flavour of the blob is not quite perfect, which takes me to the next blob in an ongoing process of learning about the medium and cultivating hand-tool intuition through exercise.

Blobs are also closely linked to my relationship with food. Ceramics relates directly to both the kitchen and the garden, settings that have an influence and guide how I make things. I like to apply a fortuitous approach to food-making, allowing space for flavours to develop. Gardening is similar: allowing ‘volunteer’ (from the compost) plants to grow and giving (some) weeds a chance. By being imaginative, ruthless



Derya Akay. *Shelves (with mirror paintings and transparent blob with garden green)* (2013). 81 x 208 x 30.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and The Apartment, Vancouver.



Derya Akay, *Scan 356 and 321-22-23 with display* (2013), 127 x 32 x 35.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and The Apartment, Vancouver.

and partially neglectful, the garden or the meal can find a pattern that is unique, and allow a lot of room for growth. These are the kinds of gestures and attitudes through which I try to form the blobs.

So—cooking, gardening, sharing—the autonomy of natural and social formations, of flavours—framing and the documentary impulse—intuition—the impossible task of contingency... Did these currents all coalesce in *anewground*? Or was that exhibition a new point of departure?

The ideas in *anewground* had been cooking in my mind for a while. Most of the elements were from sketches and ideas I had for various installations. I had some structure in my head for what I wanted to include – light, and back-lit photographic works for example, wanting to do something with the ground – but it was really through being in the space and having a 3-week installation period that the elements came together.

Initially I thought the lightbox display cases would be in a table form, but as I started developing their structure, they needed to embody more functions. I wanted them to be lightboxes, plinths, paintings and sculptures all at the same time, and organically they took shape. Their verticality also made more sense in the gallery, as it is long and narrow. I also created a digital model of all the structures in the exhibition, which forced me to realize things ergonomically from the beginning; how it would work structurally, how many sides, what shape and so on. But it's hard to imagine an exhibition beforehand and install it 'as is.' Things form through trial and error during the installation, because essentially it represents where I am within the holistic process. In most cases, rather than finalizing decisions I let the ideas mature (or rot) on their own.

Where do you see your work going next?

I'm not quite sure. I'm throwing again, and want to do more still life with vessels. There are more growing and food related ideas. I want to do a restaurant project, for example, creating a social space from crafted objects, and serving food daily. Some concrete blobs may be placed around the city to age and weather, some tempera paint made from soil. That's pretty much what I've got cooking at the studio.



Rupert Nuttle is an artist who lives in Montreal. He is co-founder and contributing editor of *CRIT*, a contemporary art paper based in Halifax.

Derya Akay is an artist born in Istanbul, Turkey and based in Vancouver, Canada. He graduated from Emily Carr University of Art and Design in 2010. Last year he presented *anewground*, his first solo project at The Apartment gallery. Check out his photo blog at <http://blobsfood.blogspot.ca/>.