

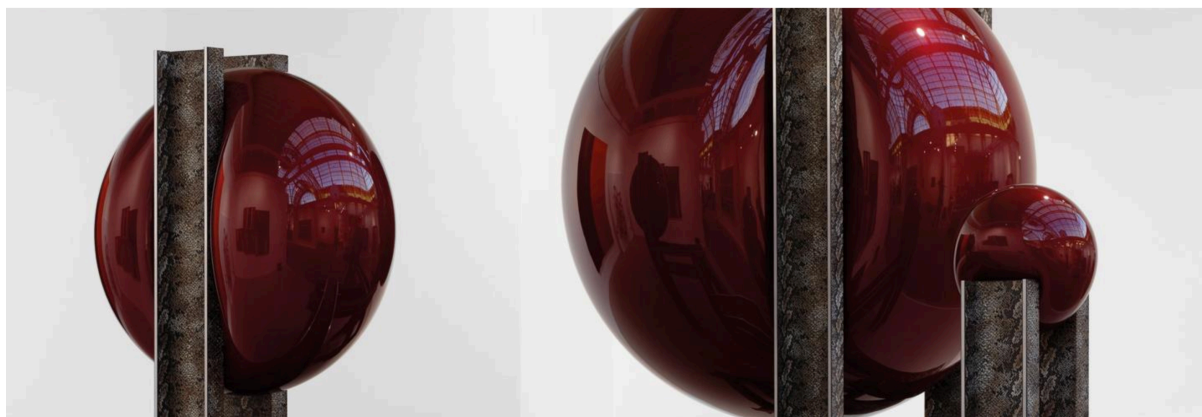
Features /

## One Take: Siobhán Hapaska's 'Snake and Apple'

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A new series of sculptures is inspired by the Book of Genesis

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Common sense dictates that an artist's most generative work be produced at the outset of her or his career, give or take a few false starts, in a period of early maturity. Yet, a quarter of a century after her first major show, Siobhán Hapaska has been enjoying a period of renewed productivity during which she has turned to the topic of genesis itself. She has done so in a typically heterodox manner that casts an intriguing retrospective light on her earlier work.

A significant amount of the artist's protean energies have been devoted of late to the generation of a family of six sculptures (possibly more are forthcoming) sharing a variant of the title 'Snake and Apple' – e.g. *snake and apples or snake, apple, tree* (both 2018) – an invocation of one of the harder origin stories of the human race as a fall from primordial grace and an expulsion from paradise. While Hapaska has produced loose groupings of formally affiliated sculptures over the years, this is as close as she has come to working in series. What these sculptures hold in common is the motif of a pinched sphere or spheres of brilliantly lacquered fibreglass in one of several apple-associated colours – red, most often, but also green and yellow – trapped in a vice-like grip by a free-standing framework of interlocking aluminium I-beams coated in artificial snakeskin. The construction of this framework can vary in complexity from something resembling a simple coat stand to an elaborate armature recalling a children's climbing frame.

This latter comparison, combined with the metal beams' association with a building site, suggests an ancillary evocation of the game *Snakes & Ladders*, though here the serpent's natural sinuosity has been unnaturally rigidified. These snakes look like ladders, or vice versa. If this nod to the enduring popularity of an ancient Indian board game is a wry acknowledgment of human life's perennial ups

and downs, its uneven progress and inevitable reversals, it is also true to the ludic



Siobhán Hapaska, *snake and apples*, 2018, aluminium, artificial snakeskin, fibreglass, two-pack acrylic paint, lacquer, 2.5 x 1.7 x 1.5 m. Courtesy: the artist, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, Tanya Bonakdar, New York and Nasher Family Collection, Dallas

temper of Hapaska's work in general, which seems perversely timely just now. Some evidence of an imperilled world's reawakened interest in Johan Huizinga's classic treatise *Homo Ludens* (Man the Player, 1938), published on the eve of World War II, was provided by the curator Ralph Rugoff's recent statement – echoing the book's focus – that his forthcoming Venice Biennale will be informed by the argument that 'it is when we play that we are most fully human'.

That said, the primary reference in 'Snake and Apple' is to the Judeo-Christian Book of Genesis, and the original sin for which humankind was driven from the Garden of Eden. Typically and tellingly, in Hapaska's take on the tale, Adam and Eve are nowhere to be seen, while the serpent retains a vestigial, artificial presence. Though weak-willed humanity was cursed for its sin of hubris to endure ever after the misery of hard labour and the pains of childbirth, the wily

snake got a far worse deal, as the Bible reminds us: 'And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.' (Genesis 3:14) Hapaska's sardonic gloss on this punitive sentencing?: 'I'm on the snake's side.'

At a time when our species' presumption of dominion over this planet and our irresponsible stewardship of its resources are being questioned more than ever, Hapaska's readiness from the beginning to traverse, indeed travesty, the bounds between a gamut of inherited binaries – human and animal, nature and culture, organic and machinic, figuration and abstraction – seems exemplary. She came of age in London, having moved there from her native Belfast to study at Goldsmiths, at a moment when Donna Haraway's 1985 *A Cyborg Manifesto* was a touchstone in cultural theory, while a comparable landmark in contemporary art was Jeffrey Deitch's exhibition 'Post Human' (1992–93), the long-out-of-print catalogue for which has lately fascinated a younger generation. The premise of 'Post Human' was that the most interesting art of the day was responding to a radical transformation of humanity through the fusion of advances in biotechnology, body enhancement and artificial intelligence. The exhibition, which toured Europe and the Middle East, provided a significant showcase for a group of US artists –

including Matthew Barney, Robert Gober, Jeff Koons and Charles Ray – with whom Hapaska has always had more evident affinities than with most of her yBa peers. That these artists are male is some indication that – the socialist feminist framing of Haraway’s manifesto notwithstanding – the politics of gender per se have never been foregrounded in Hapaska’s work, though its receptiveness to queered readings should be increasingly apparent. Even more to the point, a cursory review of the output of a panoply of artists who have come to prominence of late – from Katja Novitskova to Josh Kline – and recent coat-trailing exhibitions, such as Susanne Pfeffer’s 2014 ‘Nature after Nature’ at the Fridericianum in Kassel or Nicolas Bourriaud’s 2018 ‘Crash Test: La Révolution Moléculaire’ (Crash Test: The Molecular Revolution) at La Panacée in Montpellier, is enough to confirm the prescience of Hapaska’s most abiding concerns – with the dynamics of deracination, mutation and affiliation – as well as the currency of her sculptural idiolect.

Long before ‘hybridity’ became a buzzword of postcolonial theory, it was stitched into Hapaska’s identity in the form of her unique surname: a composite of the two family names of an only child’s estranged parents, the mother a Belfast Catholic and the father a Zoroastrian of Indian origin. Zoroastrianism, often described as the oldest active religion in the world, is a monotheistic faith with a dualist cosmology emphasizing the fundamental opposition between good and evil. The Jansenist bent of Irish Catholicism since the mid- 19th century is not dissimilar. While hardly advertising this personal inheritance, the artist does not discourage readings of her work that draw on this unusual background for some- one growing up in the midst of the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’. As the ‘Snake and Apple’ sculptures confirm, Hapaska’s distaste for proscriptive religions has not prevented her from picking away compulsively and humorously at their mythic foundations.

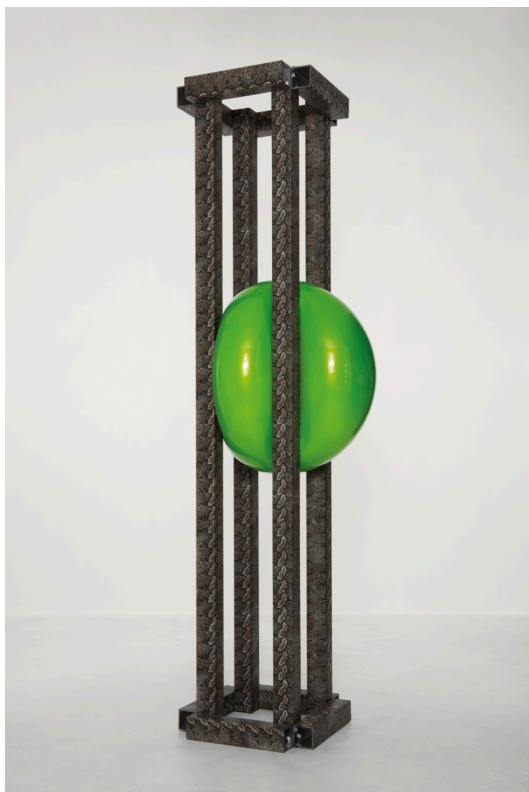
Though she may have turned to Genesis mid-career, the artist’s fascination with religious motifs was heralded by her first major show, ‘Saint Christopher’s Legless’ at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 1995–96 (memorably paired with an early showing of the rogue figuration of John Currin). The eponymous sculpture, *Saint Christopher* (1995), was a hyperrealistic avatar of the patron saint of travellers, who had been effectively decommissioned by the Catholic church during the artist’s childhood. This was excused on the grounds, as Hapaska has sarcastically observed, that ‘he possibly didn’t exist’. Her lugubrious hippy manikin – erstwhile ‘bearer of Christ’ – sported real human hair and was attired in a purple robe, but was symbolically cut off at the knees. An emblem of



Siobhán Hapaska, *snake, apple, tree*, 2018, aluminium, artificial snakeskin, fibreglass, two-pack acrylic paint, oak, lacquer, 1.5 x 0.7 x 0.7 m. Courtesy: the artist, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, Tanya Bonakdar, New York and Government Art Collection, UK

compromised mobility, uselessly rooted to the spot, *Saint Christopher* was complemented in the ICA show by a number of other sculptures in Hapaska's alternative idiom of opalescent sci-fi organicism – the shape-shifting cyborg in *Terminator 2* (1991) sprung to mind at the time – which she continued to mine for the rest of that decade.

Recurring preoccupations of Hapaska's motley art include the tension between motion and stasis, the question of origins and roots, the profusion of materialities and the promise of illumination – however misleading the latter may prove to be. All of these are rehearsed in the 'Snake and Apple' works. The first two are obviously interrelated and were encapsulated early on in two signal sculptures from the 1990s. In a room devoted to Hapaska's work in Catherine David's game-changing documenta 10, the sculpture *Stray* (1997) featured an American tumbleweed exiled from its native habitat and attached to a motorized support on which it was doomed to shuttle back and forth along a short stretch of aluminium track. A year later, the equally compromised speed merchant *Mule* (1998) consisted of the sliced-in-half body of a white Ferrari, with a pearlized finish and functioning headlights, which appeared to have been interbred with a giant pair of furry slippers. All revved up with nowhere to go, it gleamed motionlessly amid the tumult of an enveloping soundtrack of high-speed car racing.



Siobhán Hapaska, *Repressed Apple*, 2015, aluminium, artificial snakeskin, fibreglass, two-pack acrylic paint, lacquer, 2.5 x 0.7 x 0.8 m. Courtesy: the artist, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, Tanya Bonakdar, New York and LOEWE Art Collection

Critical commentary on Hapaska's work tends to highlight the bewildering variety of materials deployed, both natural and manmade, time-honoured and new-fangled. These have ranged from acupuncture needles to olive trees and from coyote fur to concrete cloth, encompassing such recondite substances as perlite and vermiculite. While the 'Snake and Apple' sculptures are relatively constrained in their material composition, they are true to Hapaska's accommodating regard for materials of all kinds, from the extremely raw to the deceptively refined. Unlike the rudely uprooted olive trees that have featured in some of her large-scale installations over the past decade – such as the vast *Downfall* (2009–15) – with their intimations of environmental destruction and the collapse of earlier civilizations, the 'tree' in *snake, apple, tree* is composed of interlocking sections of polished oak, while the 'snake' in the 'Snake and Apple' works is invariably *faux*, mere veneer, snakeskin *effect*.

As for the 'apple', the precise designation of the forbidden fruit of the Biblical 'tree of knowledge between good and evil' remains a matter for conjecture. Suggestions through the ages range from a grape to a pomegranate, while its identification with the psilocybin mushroom found inevitable favour in the hippie years courtesy of Terence McKenna and others. The possibility that its growing association in medieval Europe with an apple may be the result of a play on words between the Latin *malum* 'apple' and *malum* 'evil' is a delicious irony to be savoured by anyone who appreciates Hapaska's mercurial, shape-changing vision. Though each of the 'Snake and Apple' sculptures is, as we have come to expect, impeccably 'finished', their diversity and multiplicity prevents any one of them being perceived as definitively 'complete' as the number of 'apples' and the elaboration of their material support are subject to potentially infinite variation.

The artist's solo exhibition earlier this year at John Hansard Gallery in Southampton brought together four large sculptures. These included *Snake and Apple* (2018) and *Love* (2016). The latter is one of a number of works composed of paired biomorphic forms in concrete cloth that reach for one another in an uneasy embrace, ambiguously suggesting a state of distress or desire, conflict or compassion. The remaining two works explicitly address the theme of illumination implicit in *Snake and Apple's* origins in a story of shameful revelation. The gigantic *Candlewick* (2018) suggests a momentous snuffing out of light, whereas the artist described the equally outsize *Earthed* (2018) as 'a giant sanctuary lamp'. Only, in lieu of a sanctuary lamp's everlasting flame, intended to symbolize God's eternal presence in Judaic tradition, *Earthed* flooded the gallery with a purple light, rotating frantically like a police beacon, as if to signal a perpetual state of emergency.

*Siobhán Hapaska is an artist based in London, UK. In 2019, she has had a solo show at John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton, UK. Later this year, she will have a solo exhibition at Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, Ireland.*

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 202 with the headline 'One Take: Siobhán Hapaska's 'Snake and Apple''*

*Main image: Siobhán Hapaska. Snake and Apple. 2018. aluminium. artificial snakeskin. fibreglass. stainless steel. two-pack acrylic paint. lacquer. 2.5 x 2.2 x 2 m. Courtesy: the artist, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin and Tanya Bonakdar, New York*

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