

# ALISA BAREMBOYM

## *Between States*



KONRAD FISCHER GALERIE



*Between States*, Alisa Baremboym's first solo exhibition at Konrad Fischer Galerie comes at an important moment in her career; from her very earliest work Baremboym has focused on creating transitional moments of "becoming". Applying a wide array of materials: ceramics, steel, gelling agents, silk, and cables, with unlikely partners such as vinyl, plastic, and crude-oil by-product, she creates interactions between substances that are not normally found together. Her work functions as a catalyst for dialogues between competing states of matter. She assimilates one material into another, amplifying the object's porosity as a human membrane separating us from the outside world. Her works delineate a state of in-between-ness, and a not-knowing-what-you-are-looking-at effect, aiming for a suspension of perceptual judgment.

Her conceptualization of objects revolves around how the body is mediated, negotiated, treated and affected by the materials surrounding and penetrating it. In her previous works<sup>1</sup>, she negotiated this exchange between the body, its exteriority or receptibility, aside to the manners in which the body is shielded or punctuated, submitted and applied to other materials to coexist with (in) it. The current installation presents interchanges between materials, uses, cultural constructions, and future entanglements in the adapting inter-relations of elements within our environments.

I would argue that **Between States**, is the first exhibition to comprehend the human body as the body of the commons; as a body of state. Given that until now her works dealt with the ways in which exterior materials are being absorbed by the human body and changing it

from within, the current show emphasizes how political and worldly events affect not only the private subject but the formation of a state and its residents. The state of in-between-ness, as suggested by the exhibition title, exists not only on the ontological level, meaning not only in biological and physiological transformations but also on the epistemological level; in our cognition, logos and our being as homo politicus. Thus, Baremboym alters one matter with another; tangible essences made equivalent with abstract ones.

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It's a significant moment in international politics; migration waves are reforming states and affecting state politics, sovereign countries are gravitating towards the political right, while means of control and surveillance are becoming more common. In their book *What is Philosophy?* (1991) the French authors Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss the territorial idea of land, specifically how geography is not only physical but also mental, like a landscape<sup>2</sup>.

They suggest<sup>3</sup> the territorial distinction between a smooth (lisse) landscape and a furrowed (strié) one. The furrowed (strié) landscape is the urban, industrial, occupied terrain, woven with trails, grooves, and trenches. These constitute the land as a “real” – “estate”, a regulated space in which the subject can move only in designated paths and in realms under jurisdiction, meaning in assigned territories. We, recognize it by its ability to be purchased as property and consumed. In the smooth (lisse) landscape, which the writers signify as sacred, space is undefined, the movements taking place in it are shapeless, entangled in nonlinear directions, offering a nomadic spatiality. The smooth surface is therefore articulated not by organizational mechanism and regulated modes of action, but by the events taking place within it, in a free, unregulated and changing manner.

This kind of sacred space can be seen in exhibition spaces, which fosters open-minded un-instrumentalized movement, but moreover, it can also be seen in the movements happening within Baremboym's works; in the work *Chromosome Absorption*, 2018, the visitor encoun-

ters a rounded white column with a small round bowl on its top. The bowl is half filled with gel, inside are 5 wicks snacking through the gel next to the ceramic forms. The mineral oil gel (a material made of petroleum byproducts) is drunk by the porous ceramics, aiding the candle's flame. The gel, in a state that is neither liquid or solid, transforms its energy into light, thus the candles are digesting the petroleum for burning in an unregulated manner.

This process relates back to her previous sculptures, namely **Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit** from 2012. These biological transformations that our bodies go through on a daily basis by absorbing the environment we are in, are conveyed in the 5 sculptural works in the show. The manner in which one's environment drips in and affects the body accelerates or alters its internal processes are at the center of these works.

The work **Chromosome Absorption** consists of various abstract shapes made of un-vitrified, ceramic sitting on top of a circular column, inside a container of mineral oil gel, interspersed with burning candle wicks. One of the shapes alludes to the chromosome like shape of X's, hinting at future reproductive transformations. The burning wicks accelerate the absorption of the mineral oil into the extruded X's porous surface. All the other ceramic objects in the show are modeled after the endocrine system (the central producer and messenger system of the body's hormones). The works incorporate the pineal gland, the thyroid and the hypothalamus - which secretes hormones that regulate our body temperature, thirst, hunger, and other homeostatic systems.

In **Thyroid: Growth & Development**, 2018, and **Hypothalamus: Organ of Influence**, 2018, the ceramic forms lay on top of mineral oil gel pads; The sub-title “Organ of Influence,” links us to the outside world and the residues of our interactions, the “influence” potentially creating causality in both directions. The idea that outside events affect our enzymes and hormone discharge is irrefutable but the exact processes remain a mystery.

In **Homunculus: Matter Against Memory**, 2018, the ceramic forms are based on the outline of the area of the cerebral cortex, which supposedly controls, among many other things, the psychosomatic and cognitive ramifications of exterior events on the body. In the center of this work, polystyrene balls sit underneath a vinyl cover. They are carved by mealworms, forming small holes in them – the only process and species, known to digest and recycle polystyrene. The structure of the grouped spheres, a reference to her previous show *Conflict (process)*, are representations of grapeshot weaponry; cannonball scattershots, designed to cause excessive damage that have been widely used by states as weapons for fighting in urban terrain.

Here too, one cannot taxonomize the manners in which polystyrene movement is evolving once it gets digested by mealworms. As the artist proposed to me in one of our conversations, that this dynamic process is like immigration and assimilation; you plant an entity in a foreign environment, and you cannot tell what will remain from the “original” substance and how much it will change, will it lose itself? Will it be partly absorbed into its surroundings? Likewise, are we absorbing different environmental pollutants like endocrine disruptor chemicals from the man-made substances around us like plastic, and allowing those influencers to change the molecular structures of our bodies?

This form of unregulated movement that changes a formation from within can also be seen in the form of a state. Although the map and its territories are decisively organized by distinct lines, the unregulated penetrations coming from immigrants, infiltrators and refugees punctuating it, function similarly to the matter’s movement in the works.

Most migrants have a shorter or longer term of a nomadic period. As a necessity, they generally do not carry much luggage, deploying their body as their main shield. For these kinds of states, military industries developed concrete canvas shelters. These are commonly used in housing military and medical personnel in remote areas of the world



Alisa Baremboym  
UNIT 2: Thyroid: Growth & Development, 2018  
Concrete Canvas, ceramic, mineral oil gel, cotton wick, vinyl, glass, perspex  
144,80 x 104 x 104 cm

and could potentially be used as temporary shelter for refugees. In this series of sculptures, all the ceramic objects are shielded and cuddled in concrete canvas standing forms. Thus they function as borders, barriers, and shelters. The glands are housed within them, while they are installed from both sides of a diffuse border-like work **Between States: Membrane Perception**, 2018. This abstracted border-like image suspended from ceiling to floor regulates the visitor's movements in the gallery space and corresponds to the territorial distinction between a smooth (lisse) landscape to a furrowed (strié) one.

The semitransparent barrier is inspired by various walls and fences found throughout the globe. From the middle east to Central America, one can find concrete panels, smart bollards, metal fences; all of which cause various degrees of separation. Like bodily glands or biological membranes, they are all adjusting movement, regulating traffic and demarcating a territory. This specific work creates a dual situation of "between states"; first, it is a division, literally between the two territories of the gallery, secondly and more importantly, it responds to states of transparency and opacity, which are crucial to contemporary international politics.

As suggested by Eduard Glissant<sup>4</sup>, the claim to transparency is shaped by western colonial thinking. While the right to opacity stands up for the colonized, refugee and the migrant. He argues that opacity is mandatory to form a community; it's the thing that enables us to acknowledge the uniqueness of each subject. Thus, opacity enables other-ness, and therefore is crucial for every self-sovereign subject.

Opacity is part of visibility, and visibility is mandatory for acknowledgment. Therefore, it is crucial to provide any subject the ability to self-control and regulate her own visibility and identification. One can see this claim coming to life in demonstrations, where activists are veiled with masks to be free from identification. Simultaneously, this claim enables activists' communities to become a collective voice, therefore, a group of homo politicus. One such anonymous group of activists, the French members of Tiqqun, translated this claim into the

tactic of "becoming fog"<sup>5</sup>. Interestingly enough, Tiqqun's direct reaction to the state's order to transparency is to offer to become "in between states", as a state of matter, and as a political reaction.

In placing this semitransparent barrier in the center of the gallery, Baremboym creates a distinction between the two realms, the smooth (lisse) landscape and the furrowed (strié) one. Thus, she is enforcing us, as viewers, to engage with the works in constant negotiation of transparency and opacity, with changing degrees of freedom and control.

Baremboym's works in this show suggest to see how militarized, separatist indoctrination is applied upon subjects, as well as groups, communities and states' citizens. This indoctrination is affecting us, as a grouping of atoms and as a body, in unknown, unregulated ways. Just as we do not know how our bodies are being affected by oil byproducts, we are not sure how a precarious, frail sentient situation is shaping up inside us as part of a commons, how it is negotiated in people's souls, or how it is molded into a collective trauma. As biological transformations implied in the works have the potentiality for transmutation, same goes for bodies of state, and the particular subjects this collective body is comprised of.

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- 1 As shown in **Conflict (Process)** at 47 Canal, **Mutations** on the High line 2017-2018, **A Disagreeable Object** at Sculpture Center and with the work Locus of Control.
  - 2 Deleuze, G. & F. Guattari. (1991) (1996). Columbia University Press edition, New York.
  - 3 Deleuze, G. & F. Guattari. (1980) (1987). A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
  - 4 Glissant, E. (1997). Poetics of Relation. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
  - 5 Tiqqun (2001) The Cybernetic Hypothesis.

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Alisa Baremboym

*Between States: Membrane Perception*, 2018

Archival inkjet pigment print on silk gauze

335 x 717 cm



Alisa Baremboym  
installation view, *Crash Test, The Molecular Turn*, 2018  
La PANACÉE - MoCo Montpellier Contemporain



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