

ARTFORUM

Jana Euler

ARTISTS SPACE



Jana Euler, *Uniform 2*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 78 3/4 × 63".

Slugs are conspicuously absent from the Western canon. Although their flashier cousins, snails, make occasional art-historical appearances—creeping around the margins of medieval manuscripts and below the tulips in Dutch still lifes—slugs rarely get to play even these supporting roles. It's surprising, in a way, given how utterly bizarre and inadvertently beautiful their behavior can be. Certain species of slug, for instance, mate in midair, dangling from strands of mucus like slimy Cirque du Soleil acrobats. Twirling gently, entwined in an armless embrace, these hermaphroditic paramours extrude from holes near their heads long, milky-blue penises that wrap around one another, flaring into a luminous floral planet the color of Icelandic spa water. Both partners leave the scene fertilized. (If you have never witnessed the gastropodal act of love, this critic recommends "Slugs Having Sex," a two-minute YouTube clip made all the more sublime by David Attenborough's narration.) Surely these shape-shifting pansexual beings are prime for metaphor.

The German painter Jana Euler may very well be the first artist to devote a major body of work to the unsung mollusks. In her exhibition at Artists Space, slugs became surrogates for artists wrestling with, or resigning themselves to, their dependent role within art-world ecologies. Each of the enormous hand-sewn, pumpkin-orange effigies (which Euler considers paintings, not sculptures) on display here was stuffed, pulled, or otherwise distorted to embody the different ways in which “artists might approach or defend themselves from institutional containment,” according to the show’s accompanying brochure. The subject of *Unstretched, bound, relaxed*, 2020, a bulging specimen lashed to one of the gallery’s cast-iron columns with black ratchet straps, for instance, was “imagining itself to be freed from the authoritarian structure while bound, dependent, and well-fed.” Two other linen slugs were sewn around columns like sheaths, encasing each pilaster from floor to Corinthian capital. It looked as though these creatures had eaten the columns and had been impaled in the process: Wholly consumed by the task of consuming, the invertebrates became unlikely martyrs. The slug in *Unstretched, ramming force*, 2020, was pulled taut over a long, rectangular armature poised like a battering ram between two pillars, held there by several taut bungee cords. During my visit, a staff member tugged and released the piece. It strained forward and wobbled back into place, unable to touch, let alone bash, the wall it faced, aptly expressing the futility artists might feel when trying to change institutions from the inside.

Notably, none of the slugs exemplified the successful forms of institutional critique. The best one can do, Euler seemed to suggest, is be aware of one’s powerlessness and accept it with a sense of humor. As irreverent meditations on impotence and self-delusion in the art world, the works were oddly charming. Alternately tragic, mock heroic, complacent, and yearning, the various slugs personified the sense of ineffectuality found not just in the cultural sphere but in the face of broken political systems, environmental catastrophe, and other intractable problems. With its suggestions of kink and bondage throughout, Euler’s installation hinted that some catharsis might be found in exploring one’s own weakness and vulnerability.

Other pieces, not all of them successful, spoke to broader questions about bodies—those weird, arbitrary envelopes that contain the immaterial self—and the extent to which we can breach our own somatic confines. *Folie à deux*, 2019, offered an aerial view of two crudely painted cartoonish green figures merging on what might have been a yellow sofa. Messy lines described jumbled limbs, sausage fingers, and overlapping heads on a cloudy ground of noxious key lime. Two large canvases, *Close Rotation (Left)* and *Close Rotation (Right)*, both 2019, each depicted a man scrunched to fit within its borders, as though he had been shoved inside a glass cube and we were studying him from above. But Euler brought more depth to these same themes through her invertebrate muses. In two other paintings, both 2019, a slug was warped to fill the entire rectangular composition. One animal was splayed to meet the edges of *Uniform 1*; another was bent into blocky right angles in *Uniform 2*. By showing these soft, squishy creatures reconfigured to comply with geometric demands, Euler was perhaps asking how we humans compromise ourselves—bending and prostrating and expanding ourselves—to fill spaces and meet needs that have nothing to do with our natural inclinations.

— Zoë Lescaze