



CLEARING

Daniel Dewar & Grégory Gicquel
The Needle and the Chisel
April 19 – May 27, 2023

Clearing is pleased to present *The Needle and the Chisel*, a solo exhibition in our Brussels' main space by Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel comprising a suite of embroidered quilts and sculptures carved in oak, created by the artists in their studios.

The words produce (prə 'dju:s) and produce (prɒ dju:s) are homographs, spelled identically but pronounced differently. One is a verb linked to the act of making and the other a noun that—since the eighteenth century—usually means harvested fruits and vegetables or objects created by human design. In this suite of new works, Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel grapple with both meanings, as they combine their ongoing practice which explores craft and industrial production techniques with the depiction of flora, fauna, edible tubers, baked goods, sprouts and buds, everyday textile items, and the apparatus used to create them.

Eleven machine-embroidered and hand assembled and finished quilts hang on the walls of the gallery space. The rectangular textile works appear like isolated green fields or parcels, plucked from a high altitude view. However, rather than uniform pastures belonging to the ever-growing agro-industrial complex, each field here zooms in on a variegated and joyful pastoral diorama.

Panning from the ground up, we see an ecological system at work: earthworms squirm, bringing in oxygen to the soil and creating space for roots. Foraging insects flit between plants and weeds, pollinating as they go. The principles of permaculture consider that all materials and energies are interdependent: cycles of life play out on the quilts as we see “parasites” such as the colorado beetle and cabbage white caterpillars nibble at precious produce in order to reproduce themselves eventually, while us humans unknowingly await the blossoming of untouched fruits to begin nibbling on them ourselves. Entwined with ideas of interaction are thoughts on constant flux. The transformative nature of the representations upends any impressions of permanence: here all is change. We see larvae evolve into bugs, caterpillars to moths or butterflies, roots into stems into flowers.

The needle mentioned in the exhibition title evokes the needles that embroider, stitch and overlock the quilts at a speed and dexterity in turn recalling the flicker of a worker bee's or butterfly's wings. Yet, the insects are not the only ones at work here. The cycle of labour invested in each piece, as well as the invisibilization and complexification of all modern produce (whether agricultural or textile) are highlighted by including the sewing and embroidery machines on the quilts themselves. Tautology (a recurring antic in the duo's works) arises, as subject and technique collide in a mind-straining self-referential loop: the bobbin of thread on the quilt is stitched in the same thread it illustrates, and sewn by the same machine it is represented upon. The technology habitually employed to embroider vectorised logos on caps and sweatshirts is almost exhausted by Dewar and Gicquel in a gesture of misuse and reappropriation. The artists have removed the machines from an industrial setting, and from the confines of the studio push them to their limits by means of the sheer quantity of stitches, sidestepping their designated use to “brand”.

Placed amongst the pictorial fields of quilts are two carved relief sculptures in oak that take a pair of pullovers for their subject. The theme of the stitch, present throughout the exhibition, is here rendered sculpturally.

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Dewar and Gicquel chisel the garments in wood by hand, irreverently revisiting the age-old textile techniques of stocking- and garter stitches, already complex in themselves. Not only highlighting the overlaps between decoration and utility, these works unveil both the distance that exists between ourselves and the fabrics we wear and the dwindling use of arts and crafts by the masses: when was the last time you knitted yourself a pullover, let alone chiselled one?

The room adjacent to the main gallery welcomes a series of further oak reliefs representing home-baked apple tarts placed in fluted cake tins. Two basic tools are at the heart of the exhibition, as are two respective movements: while the needle pricks, the chisel incises. In a parallel to the pullovers next door, the desserts have been coaxed from the depths of solid oak in the artists' studio, each stroke of the chisel revealing that perhaps within every tree hides a pie, you just have to find the right angle. Once again toying with ideas of tradition, decoration, and a revival of home economics, the apple tart motif acts as a symbol for the reappropriation of our productive agency and a call to appreciate the imperfection of all things, edible or sculptural.

Viewers are invited to partake in a musical interlude, signalled by the presence of an oversized flute carved by hand in oak and placed among the quilts. Dewar and Gicquel once again thumb their noses at common logic imposed by either their subject matter or material: carving could be deemed impractical or even flippant here as flutes of this kind are most often turned on a lathe, just like decorative table legs and staircase spindles. This non-functional flute and its allusion to pastoral folk song as well as to Pan—the flautist god of the wild, shepherds and flocks, and rustic music—reminds us that rather than using our mouths to consume, we can use the breath which animates each and every one of us in order to create anew and commune with nature.

As our grasp upon our own production facilities seems to gradually loosen, Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel's works sing an ode of encouragement to reclaim them. Be it a needle sewing thread, a trowel sowing seeds, a chisel carving oak, or a knife slicing an apple, the duo gesture towards the tools, techniques, and shift of perspective that could counteract the ongoing industrialisation and uniformisation of all things. These works populated by potatoes, peas, insects, and machines suggest we can regain self-sufficiency, self-awareness, and in(ter)dependence by playfully questioning existing systems, revisiting supposedly obsolete traditions and practices, and reappropriating modern technologies, doing so with joy.

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Daniel Dewar and Grégory Giquel would like to thank all the team at Clearing, as well as all those taking part in the making of the present exhibition, including Céline Aernoudt, Ailsa Cavers, Sara Daniel, Janina Fritz, Olivier Levêque, Anna Reutinger, Régis Romé, Estelle Saignes and Stéfan Tulépo.