

Alexandra Bircken A-Z

english



Alexandra Bircken

A-Z

July 28, 2021 – January 16, 2022

Exhibition brochure

Text
Monika Bayer-Wermuth

Translator
Carolyn Kelly

Editor
Ursula Fethke

Design
PARAT.cc

Museum Brandhorst
Bayerische
Staatsgemäldesammlungen
Theresienstraße 35 a
80333 Munich
+49 (0)89 23805-2286
museum-brandhorst.de

Cover: Snoopy, 2014 © the artist. Photo: Andy Keate,
Courtesy BQ, Berlin and Herald St, London

The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive publication. In addition to a large picture essay, six contributions by internationally renowned authors examine the artist's work from different perspectives.

328 pages, ca. 240 color images
Hatje Cantz Verlag
German edition ISBN 3775750436
English edition ISBN 3775750428
Available in our bookstore.

A comprehensive program of conversations and talks, guided tours and workshops invites visitors to get to know the artist's work and the themes of the exhibition from new perspectives.

Further information about our ongoing program can be found at museum-brandhorst.de/en/calendar/

For children and families
Children aged between 6 and 12 can explore the exhibition while quizzing, drawing and painting with the help of two activity posters.
As part of the Pop-Up Factory, we invite children and families to design their own artworks and engage creatively with the exhibition.

The exhibition is generously supported by
Jan Fischer
PIN. Freunde der Pinakothek der Moderne e.V.

Media partner
ZÜNDFUNK Bayern 2

“I am concerned with our immediate environment. The architecture in which we move, as well as the fabrics in which we wrap ourselves.

Ultimately, it always comes back to the protection and, at the same time, the vulnerability of our bodies. Our skin is not only a shell, but also the interface between inside and outside. This is where I start.”

— Alexandra Bircken

#MBAlexandraBircken



**MUSEUM
BRANDHORST**

Alexandra Bircken is a sculptor known for her objects and installations that incorporate an unusual range of materials: from everyday objects such as hair-dye packaging, rocking horses and sawn-up motorcycles, through textiles in handmade and machine-processed form to organic matter such as wood, leather, bones, or even a placenta. Anything that surrounds us can become a sculptural medium. Her approach is characterized by an examination of the human body, its needs, desires, and relationship to its environment. Highly topical questions such as the need for protection of the individual, gender identity in its ambivalence, and the relationship between humans and machines are taken up and thematized in Bircken's sculptures.

Today Bircken is internationally renowned in contemporary sculpture. But she arrived at the visual arts via a circuitous route. By the time she became known as an artist in 2003, she already had a career in fashion under her belt. In the early 1990s, she was awarded a coveted place on the fashion course at Central Saint Martins College in London and subsequently established herself in the field: first with her own fashion label, followed by a position as a designer in Paris. In the early 2000s, she began to experiment more freely with textiles – leading to the creation of her first sculptures. She was living in Cologne at the time, and the art scene there quickly took notice of her. National and international monographic shows and participation in important group

exhibitions soon followed, including “Unmonumental” at the New Museum in New York in 2007, “Skulpturales Handeln” at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2011, and “Material Encounters” at The Hepworth Wakefield in 2019, to name but a few. Bircken has played a significant role in shaping central themes of sculpture since the 2000s. Updating concepts and approaches first explored in Arte Povera and textile art, Bircken expands them to include questions of technology, albeit with an analog approach. Bircken has taught at the Academy of Fine Arts Munich since 2018, where she holds a professorship in sculpture.

This exhibition is the largest solo show of the 1967 Cologne-born artist and brings together works from throughout her practice: from the first sculpture completed in Bircken's store-front studio “Alex” in Cologne in 2003 to installations that she conceived especially for the space at Museum Brandhorst. Rather than proceeding chronologically, this show uses themes and formal concepts to progress through the artist's oeuvre, attempting to capture her sculptural repertoire of forms from “A–Z”: from Bircken's exploration of textiles to the relationship of the human body to its environment and to her vibrant and organic-seeming machines.

“The skin is the body’s largest organ, it is our interface with the world.”

Alexandra Bircken is greatly occupied with the question of our “second skin,” the textiles and materials in which we wrap ourselves. “We encounter them everywhere,” Bircken says, “on our bodies, in our beds, in our homes. They are one of the first human cultural achievements and are still closely linked to our lives today.” This ubiquity of textile structures is expressed in a series of works here in the room: from the improvised architecture of a shelter in ➔ “Cagey” (2012), to the expansive ➔ untitled netted piece (2011) seen from the staircase, to ➔ “Uknit Bonn” (2012), a fabric made of steel mesh.

Clothing not only serves to protect the human body, but also has an important role in forming identity. It communicates to the outside world and conveys to our environment; its weight and volume also have a physical and psychological impact on the wearers themselves. Leather, for example, protects the human skin, while at the same time representing a fetishizing charging of the body. This is connected to the archaic gesture of putting on a dead animal skin to go into battle, as well as to the danger to which one is willing to expose oneself with this clothing. Such properties and histories of materials also play a role in the clothing choices of subcultures. A sculpture like ➔ “INXS” (2016), which consists of protectors, hair, and worn parts of motorcycle clothing, reflects such ideas.

The skin – whether in the organic, technical or architectural sense – also interests Bircken in its role as an interface between inside and outside. It encloses the body and conceals everything underneath. Making a cut and revealing what is inside is an action that recurs in numerous works by the artist. In ➔ “RSV 4” (2020), she cuts a motorcycle in half with a precise incision. What becomes visible is the interior of a machine that is constructed to fit human proportions and only functions in connection with the human body. With its chambers, tubes and connections, its inner workings even resemble it.

Bircken finds the interior architecture of Museum Brandhorst ambivalent: on the one hand a cool white cube, on the other unexpectedly intimate due to the wooden staircase with its leather handrail. The artist seems to want to peel a strip of skin off this architecture with her spatial intervention ➔ “Spare Ribs” (2021). On the floor along the wall – instead of the actual wooden bars of the ventilation – a neat arrangement of trimmed bones (beef ribs) is revealed. On the one hand, they correspond with the corporeal impression of the leather handrail, but on the other hand, they impute to the architecture itself the quality of a living organism.

The video ➔ “Technostrick” (2016) shows in close-up the forward and backward movements of the carriage of a knitting machine. In row after row of stitches, a woolen thread is interlinked to form a textile structure that continues to grow beyond the image into infinity. The work focuses on the mechanical production of structure and its omnipresence. But it also refers to the transformative potential of matter: here to the transformation of a long string into knitted fabric.

The installation ➔ “Lunge” (Lungs) was created in 2013 and exhibited that year in the pavilion in front of the Volkstheater am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin, viewable from all sides of the glass structure. Now, at Museum Brandhorst, it nestles between the dark walls of the media rooms. The installation is now open on one side and confronts the viewer abruptly. Despite the completely regular inflation and suction of air, a movement is created that cannot be completely controlled. The direction in which the sculpture first expands, and which shape it takes when it straightens up and collapses, is unpredictable. The title of the work already hints at its reference to the organic. It raises the question as to the extent to which architecture itself can be understood as an organism. At the same time, the work invites us to reflect on our own breathing and its relationship to the body.

Work titles

In her work titles, Alexandra Bircken often refers directly to the forms or materials of the works. This creates another level of reflection, almost as if at a distance. Both the sound of the words and the images they create, or specific qualities of idioms and terms can be relevant. For example, “Slip of the Tongue,” the large tongue at the museum entrance, conveys the physical component of misspeaking. Bircken thus creates a point of contact between language and sculpture. Other works refer to

specific objects in their titles: “Skiliesl,” for example, recalls the hand-held knitting device “Strickliesl,” and thus the idea of production. The soft, black latex-covered forms of the sculptures “Big,” “Ugly,” “Fat,” and “Fellow,” on the other hand, refer quite specifically to “BUFF”, the nickname for the U.S. B-52 flying bomber and thus to a military context. The dynamics between object and title show that the language of forms cannot be objective.

The knot is one of the oldest cultural techniques. It allows the firm connection of two independent components. Sailors, seamstresses, surgeons and midwives are able to solve complex problems using knots. Thus the knot stands symbolically for a difficult task: for a knot that needs to be untangled. In Alexandra Bircken's work, the knot can be found as a form as well as a concept: from the handmade and practical quality to the knot as a hypothesis.

For ➡ "Berge" (Mountains, 2003), Bircken ran a woolen thread through a knitting machine. She then created a three-dimensional form from the resulting interwoven tighter cord. In this, the artist's first sculpture, the textile becomes autonomous and can literally stand for itself. From that point on, her objects "no longer need the body as justification," as she once put it.

➡ "Origin of the World" (2017) shows a placenta prepared in Kaiserling fixative. The organ connects two living beings: a mother – in this case Alexandra Bircken – and a child – her daughter, who was born in 2011. It is the ultimate knot where two blood circuits meet. The title itself refers to Gustave Courbet's famous 1866 painting "L'Origine du monde," which shows an unobstructed view of a woman's vagina. Bircken's work can be understood as a response to Courbet's male gaze. Instead of a sexualized and mystifying perspective, her origin story is a biological one. At the same time, she uses the work to address her own identity as a mother and artist. This brings to mind recent art history since the 1960s, especially female artists such as Mary Kelly, Cathy Wilkes, or Lea Lublin, who addressed precisely

this double role in their works and sought to draw attention to its social dimension. Bircken literally brings both attributions together in "Origin of the World," in that the female body here also takes on the actual production of art.

The artist repeatedly draws on scientific phenomena in her sculptures. For example, the bronze-cast jacket on the floor titled ➡ "Klein's Jacket" (2017) refers to a Klein bottle: an object that consists of only one surface, so that inside and outside cannot be distinguished from each other. Here, too – as the intertwined sleeves make clear – we are dealing with a knot. By transferring a moving object into a heavy, cast form, it solidifies here into an immortalized moment.

The use of textiles as sculptural material takes various forms within Alexandra Bircken's practice. The grid, which forms the basic structure for textile fabrics, is a recurring motif in her work. In the process, it takes on a life of its own, is transferred to other materials, and finds its way back into the material in a new context.

Historically, the grid is closely linked to the idea of the autonomization of art: it exists for itself and needs no justification by reference to a world outside itself. In addition to this inward-looking quality, however, the grid also has the potential to "[acknowledge] a world beyond the frame," according to art historian Rosalind Krauss.

With the use of partly organic materials and their space for unpredictability, Bircken's structures depart from the precision of strictly abstract grids. Nevertheless, the artist uses different qualities and potentials of the grid in numerous works. For example, it sometimes serves as a means for her to look inward, at the materials and formal structural principles she uses. This is true, for example, of ➡ "Birch Field" (2011), where the focus is drawn to individual honeycomb-like units of woven textile dipped in mortar. Then again, her grid-like works enter into a direct dialog with architecture and thus also spatially relate to their surroundings beyond the work itself, as is evident here in ➡ "Runner in the Woods" (2011), ➡ "Spill" (2012), or ➡ "Black Skin" (2012), as well as in the Patio (Room 1) in the large net-like work.

However, the idea of structuring inherent in the grid also becomes central to Bircken's practice

in other forms, such as when the work ➡ "DNA" (2012) playfully reproduces the complex nature of the same using a variety of materials on a latex strip.

“Bronze is a very timeless and classic sculptural material, which is why I find it very appropriate for casting less classic objects like a worn pair of sports gloves. Bronze always has a sublime character.”

Many museums also house collections of armor and weapons from different eras. They not only show the technological development of instruments of defense and attack, but also demonstrate an astonishing aesthetic will to design that was influenced by fashions and tied to representational purposes. With the bronze sculpture ➡ “Warrior” (2020), Alexandra Bircken makes it clear that the concept of protective clothing in the civilian sector borrows heavily from a military idea. The titular lettering on the hockey glove suggests the analogy between sports arena and battleground. The casting in a metallic material underscores the association with armor.

Armor directs the gaze to the exterior, which may be nothing more than a shell long since abandoned (➡ “Ex,” 2017). In an optimization society, in which every individual tries to meet the highest demands, that which is most fragile is sometimes found on the inside. This

ambivalence of armor and need for protection is also found in Bircken’s work: ➡ “Nabelschau” (2021), in English “navel gazing”, stands for absolute self-examination and, as permeable as the work may seem at first glance, it is a rigid armor.

Protectors and armor, as well as machines and vehicles, make us think about humans and their immediate extensions. Bircken does not play these media and machines off against the body, however, but rather marks a boundary shift between them. Organic and technical materials come together on one level in her work, as in the four motorcycle tanks of ➡ “Honda Honda Bionda Onda” (2017), which are lined up diagonally and to which pieces of human hair are attached. Sexual connotations of the machine, from its drive and fuel to the blond wave (Italian “bionda onda”) between the legs are thus abstractly negotiated on a sculptural level. This encounter also becomes an expression of a modern confrontation with instincts and their satisfaction, as found in motor sports through sound, rhythms, speed and movement. An association with techno-culture and its interlocking of humans and machines is also present.

➡ “Knut” (2010), the large white sculpture made of polyester wadding in this room, recalls the formal nonchalance and material-related aesthetics of postminimalism. In the 1960s, artists such as Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, and Lynda Benglis devoted their sculptures to the so-called anti-form. It was important to them that the form of the works resulted from the chosen materials. Instead of submitting to the geometrical-mechanical rigor of minimalism, the materials were supposed to bear witness to actions, working methods and thought processes. This can also apply to Bircken’s sculpture, whose title, moreover, points in a whole new direction. In 2010, when “Knut” was created, the polar bear of the same name, born in Berlin Zoo in 2006, was still present in Germany’s collective memory. Although the arctic creature ostensibly has nothing to do with the creation of the work or its concept, it provides a whole set of new associations. With such references and the tongue-in-cheek humor inherent in many of her work titles, Bircken breaks the conceptual plane and creates a playful distance.

The anthropomorphic – the human-like – nature of things is found in Bircken’s art from the beginning. ➡ “Spaceman” (2005), whose pose is dictated by the growth of branches, is an early example of this practice. In addition to found objects from nature such as leaves, twigs, and branches, the artist uses any “household goods” (or “Hausrat,” which was also the title of one of her exhibitions in 2012 at the Kunstverein in Hamburg), i.e. materials and objects taken from the immediate environment, as sculptural means. In part, she constructs from them such elemental objects as ➡ “Blondie, begging” (2010). The sculpture has

something so self-sufficient and sovereign about it that it seems to us like an animated character. The figure not only confronts the viewer on a human scale, but also performs an action with its basket-like bulge, which contains a few coins. It begs and thus receives a narrative.

“With the vagina bronze, which meets you at eye level, the inside is turned out and becomes visible. Here, I’m concerned with drawing attention to the female anatomy – that is, making a cast of the interior of the vagina and allowing it to occupy a visible space otherwise reserved for male genitalia.”

The female body is a central theme in Alexandra Bircken’s work. ➔ “Trophy” (2016), for example – a cast of a vagina first in bronze and later, as exhibited here, in nickel silver – deliberately addresses the specificity of its physique. Instead of an exact replica, however, the artist undertakes a significant intervention by casting the actual cavity of the body as a sculptural form. With this gesture of empowerment, she thematizes identity issues of the female sex. Some of these works lead back to her own body as a point of reference and origin, encouraging us to view them as a kind of self-portrait.

The points of contact between inside and outside lead to the question of where exactly our bodies end. Is the skin our outermost barrier or have

we long since been operating in a field of tension encompassing the media and technologies that surround and network us? The chassis of a car, for example, as in the work ➔ “Smartie” (2017), could be understood as an extension of the human body. Yet not only the drivable undercarriage, but also the shell of the vehicle is missing here. Just like the vulnerable body, the car thus also shows itself defenseless as a skeleton and thus continues the analogy between humans and machines.

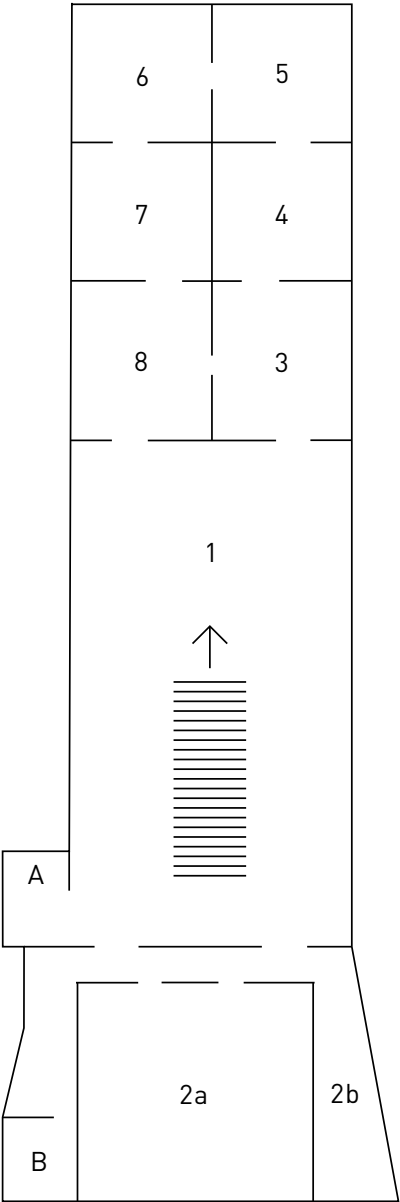
Another architectural intervention can be found in this room. Bircken has replaced the wooden bars of the ventilation grilles with chicken bones. In this way, the installation breaks through the aesthetic of the white cube, the immaculate exhibition space, and points to processes of aging – and ultimately mortality – of artworks and institutions. That is a somewhat uncomfortable confrontation for a museum whose mission is to preserve objects for eternity.

Skis, a bra, a piece of furniture, a set of gearshift knobs: Alexandra Bircken draws on objects as artistic materials that are familiar to us from our everyday lives – not only in their shape and appearance, but also in their feel and use. But the artist detaches them from this context. In doing so, she enables a new, much more formal way of looking at these objects. Above all, however, the combination of different objects also opens up new and unexpected associations.

In ➔ “Stummer Diener” (2017, literally a “silent servant”), a piece of clothing, a few chicken eggs, and a dignified piece of furniture combine to form a sculpture. Instead of a fine suit, which one would expect to find on such a valet stand – which gave the work its title –, stiff motorcycle gear is arranged into a kneeling figure that seems to be praying. Instead of cufflinks, the shelf contains two oversized chicken eggs. As familiar as these objects are to us, they seem alien – almost uncanny – here. Beyond an aesthetic and sculptural solution, the positioning and arrangement of the materials seem to evoke something that might best be compared to a ritual.

Other objects – such as the iconic machine gun ➔ “UZI” (2016) – change their meaning not by being combined with new materials, but by radical sculptural interventions. “The cut not only reveals the inner life of the objects, but deactivates and reevaluates them. The cut transforms the iconography into something that can be read from a different perspective – however, it is still part of the same story,” says Bircken. Here, then, it is not the recontextualization but the deconstruction that charges the object with new meaning.

Alexandra Bircken’s sculptures do not encounter us as concrete objects of contemplation; rather, they are themselves ideas, theses, and imagined rituals. It is the motifs related to the body that convey themselves as a unifying aspect in her works. The body is the continuous point of reference to which the artist’s work is oriented. It emancipates itself from it in order to find its way right back to it.



- Room 1 see page 6
- Room 2a/2b see page 7
- Room 3 see page 8
- Room 4 see page 9
- Room 5 see page 10
- Room 6 see page 11
- Room 7 see page 12
- Room 8 see page 13

- A Lift
- B WC