

FRIEZE

JULY 23, 2016

KATHLEEN RYAN
JOSH LILLEY, LONDON, UK

by Harry Thorne



Kathleen Ryan, *Bacchante (Tall White)*, 2016, concrete, marble and stainless steel, 94 x 55 x 42 inches

Sappho once wrote: 'I declare/That later on,/Even in an age unlike our own,/Someone will remember who we are.' Since 'later on' is now, let's agree that the poet was right. We remember her, of course, and look what else we've taken from the Ancient Greeks: the basis of democracy, the foundations of philosophy and the writings of Homer, not to mention the fundamentals of science, the Olympics and the alarm clock.

Kathleen Ryan's sculptures have long made use of Ancient Greek iconography to coax forward more contemporary tropes. Take her ceramic *Wine Fountain* (2012), which perched on a base of cinder blocks and leaked all over the floor; *The Rise and Fall*, a row of glazed Ionic columns that dissected UCLA's pristine New Wight Gallery in 2014; or *More Is More Snake Ring* (2014): part coiled chthonic serpent, part end-of-season Topshop accessory.

The same goes for Ryan's exhibition at Josh Lilley, which marks the Los Angeles-based artist's debut solo show. In the first room, a heavy bunch of concrete grapes hangs, like petrified balloons or fossilized buoys shackled to one another with heavy-set chains. Some glossy, some cracked, they recall the cluster of fruit that Dionysus once supported on his broad shoulder, but the sculpture's base, a precarious structure coated with a sickly pink, evokes the modern-day seaside: those cheaply made, once-bright amusement arcades, long dulled by the salty spray of the ocean.

Aptly titled *Bacchante (Pink Table)* (all works 2016), its twin *Bacchante (Tall White)* waits downstairs, a more sizeable bunch drooping from a head-height marble plinth. If we take the first iteration as prototype, then this is finished product: sleek, grandiose, heroic. That said, the raw stainless steel links peeking through the gaps in the grapes again shatter the illusion of Grecian myth, tugging the piece back to the industrialized present. The same

goes for the adjacent *Caprice*, a concrete oyster whose pearlescent treasure is a cream, factory-produced bowling ball, and the shimmering pewter laurel wreath, *Untitled*. A nod towards the constructed notion of beauty, the floral band is held in place by a weighted, rusting bucket; its delicate silver leaves bound together with copper wire.

Intersecting this classical imagery are *Lipstick Rail* and *Light Rail*, minimal steel stair rails that have been appropriated, painted and twisted into jagged interventions. The first, a single bar of primary red, balances precariously in a twisted L-shape alongside *Bacchante (Pink Table)*. Downstairs, the second has a sunlight-yellow finish and is undoubtedly the most beautiful work here. Its thin banisters run across the floor, then cut upwards in crooked stripes before coming to rest awkwardly close to the ceiling, like beams of light or jagged sound waves. Against the white brick walls, it deftly partitions the room, heavy but rising effortlessly, brutal in its materiality but graceful in its slow tack from left to right.

My favourite spot in Ryan's show is downstairs, in the centre of the first room, right in front of *Light Rail*. If you look through the sharp yellow struts, you will see an old radiator, its white pipes vertically dissecting the yellow; the underside of a staircase, its steps creating a grid effect; and a sloping water pipe framing the whole composition. It's a geometry of utility, but it's not without charm, which is exactly what Ryan's work argues for: the crude materials that come together to produce beauty and the untapped beauty that can be found in crude places.