

ARTFORUM

Olga Balema

BRIDGET DONAHUE

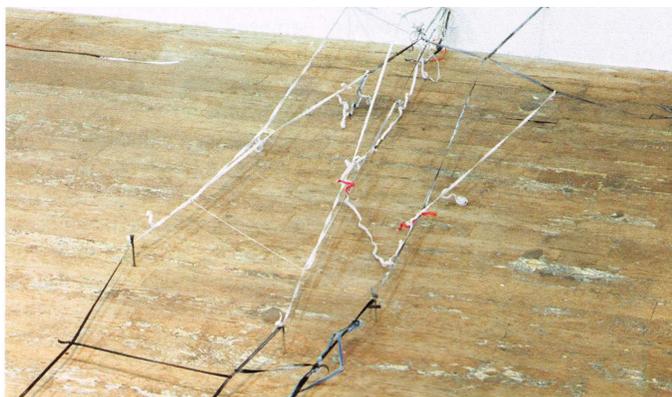
10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5 . . . The integers titling Olga Balema's thirteen works, all produced this year, descended unsteadily in a clockwise direction from Bridget Donahue's entrance. Each number corresponded to a diagrammatic composition of thin elastic strips, some of which were stretched out in lengths of up to forty-five feet, raised slightly above the floor by the nails and staples that held them in place. In some areas the strands were split in two or glued together to create intersections, mostly at right angles; elsewhere, extraneous bands curled underfoot, like crimped ribbons or dried flora, while others crept up the walls as if seeking escape. The numeric titles and limited media heightened the impression that these were formal exercises, less figurative than most of Balema's work—packages of latex, photographs, sundry fluids, or assemblages of steel and fleshy ingredients not unfamiliar to the contemporary art landscape. The reduced means were refreshing, encouraging visitors to walk more slowly and look more carefully.

Balema had painted significant swaths of her white elastic black, blue, green, and red—the uneven coats of acrylic strained from the tautness. Much of the paint was matte, save for the moments of lustrous, deep charcoal in *1*. The colors occasionally matched traces of paint on the sanded wooden floor. At certain points, discerning figure from ground became difficult, and it was hard to see the work. The viewer's sense of perceptual confusion was enhanced by the shadows and various odd intersections of the pieces. The show's title, "brain damage," might have referred to that disorientation, or to the overall effect of the installation, which resembled a synaptic network dotted with the broken pathways of loosely hanging and insecurely attached strings. Though quite different from her more corporeal sculptures, the painted elastic still evoked flesh and its coverings, such as the cinched waistbands and cuffs of mass-produced clothing (one could almost feel that quick snap against the skin). Given these bodily connotations, and perhaps in the context of Bridget Donahue's raw exhibition space—a prewar loft on the Bowery in Manhattan—"brain damage" felt like the draft stage of an Eva Hesse sculpture, particularly in regard to the Minimalist's "notorious fragility and insistent decay," as the art historian Karen Kurczynski once described.

Though less technically refined than Hesse's art, Balema's work is characterized by a procedural, relatively two-dimensional use of the synthetic fiber that lets it settle into many permutations of line—drawing, clothesline, circuit, boundary, poetic unit of verse. Some pertinent associations: The system of roughly gridded cords and stakes on the floor resembled the similarly constructed outlines that might be placed in raw earth to plan the foundation of a building, or the strings and flagging pins that mark off excavation units at archaeological sites—the first stages of building up or digging down. Balema's layouts are too small and jumbled (or damaged?) to correspond to stable architectures or meaningful coordinates, but they might serve as a purely conceptual architectural plan—think Siah Armajani's *North Dakota Tower*, 1968, a design he drafted in the late 1960s for a structure that would cast a shadow over the width of the titular state. The implication of additional dimensions also conjured a more flexible version of Duchamp's *Sixteen Miles of String*, 1942—minus, unfortunately, the ur-Conceptualist's deviousness and criticality.

Yet Balema is neither architect nor archaeologist nor painter. She is a sculptor. And by utilizing a reduced palette, so to speak, and just a sliver of the gallery's volume, she opened up her work to wider interpretations than her more immediately seductive sculptures allow. Elastic is manufactured for flexibility and reuse; Balema's sculptures can be restretched and reordered into new iterations, suggesting that even established forms inevitably change over time.

—Mira Dayal



Olga Balema, *1*, 2019
elastic bands, paint,
glue, nails, staples,
dimensions variable.