



Entertainment / Visual Arts

Iris Häussler's Ask the Frog at Daniel Faria Gallery

Artist's wax-encased fabric raises questions about interpretation, but Häussler isn't giving the answers.



CHRIS SO / TORONTO STAR

Iris Häussler in her west-end Toronto studio, which she created by converting her garage. All the works here are in "Ask the Frog" at Daniel Faria Gallery.

By: Murray Whyte Visual arts, Published on Fri Jun 12 2015

"Ask the Frog," says Iris Häussler in her new show at Daniel Faria Gallery and she's right up front about it: A step inside the show, a white-lacquered amphibian perches resolutely on a column, a helpful stack of cards in its outstretched arms.

If you missed the hint, Häussler's through talking, at least in the here and now. It marks a departure for the German-born, Toronto-resident artist. Over the past decade or so, Häussler's immersive, affecting installations have been powered by the force of her tragic narratives: outsiders, struggling to leave their mark in indifferent worlds.

First, Joseph Wagenbach, the German immigrant found wandering his west-end Toronto neighbourhood, taken into care only to leave behind his home, packed full of tortured sculpture and drawing made in obsessive bursts but never shown to the world. Then Mary O'Shea, the Irish maid who more than a century ago tended the mansion on the Grange, now

part of the Art Gallery of Ontario, leaving buried in its walls tiny sculptures wrought from the misery of her servile experience.

In time, we learned neither Joseph nor Mary had ever existed, but rather were Häussler pulling the strings of elaborately detailed fictions ushered to the very edge of reality. She meant to craft genuine emotional experience outside the cerebral realm of art, tugging at hearts before minds, and she succeeded. Anyone with half a soul who saw either one would remain haunted by them; Joseph, whose home I entered clueless in 2006 and left awestruck, lives with me still.

“Ask the Frog” is a step away from all that. “It’s sculpture, it’s concept, it’s playfulness, it’s experiment. It’s very freeing,” Häussler said recently, in her studio with the work before the show opened this week. Transported to the gallery, Häussler’s works — bolts of fabric encased in precise blocks of wax, their folds fluid and visible inside their opaque prisons — are tense little bundles of material and form.

From afar, the wax blocks evoke marble or limestone, the various fabrics tracking their clean, matte surfaces like mineral impurity. At one end of each block or another, the fabric escapes to drape high to the rafters or pile in soft mounds on the ground.

They’re entwined material opposites: soft and hard, fluid and rigid, in forced conversation. They’re also exceptionally, hauntingly beautiful. The fabric is all pulled from Häussler’s 30-year collection, ranging from lace and linen to blankets and bed sheets (“If I need something I will run upstairs and strip my own bed,” she says. “I’m very reckless.”)

It’s tempting to read the fabrics as something other than a material counterpoint: a deliberate, homespun foil, maybe, to the rigid precision of the wax blocks, inflecting their high formalism with the impurity of the domestic?

Häussler smiles, impishly mum. “I don’t give the answers this time,” she says. “People can think for themselves.”

Iris Häussler: Ask the Frog continues at Daniel Faria Gallery to July 25.

-Whyte, Murray. “Iris Häussler’s Ask the Frog at Daniel Faria Gallery”, Toronto Star, June 12, 2015.