

ArtReview

Zarouhie Abdalian *Production*

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In *Production*, New Orleans-native Zarouhie Abdalian links the abstract concept of work to the often-overlooked materials of labour – ballast stones, motors, construction tools, the ambient sounds of the workday. Using a spare, poetic aesthetic, Abdalian monumentalises these objects and calls attention to the hidden histories of sidelined and mistreated labouring bodies. These histories, of course, are especially poignant in the local context of the port city of New Orleans and the greater Mississippi. The conceptual artist has long favoured a site-specific method, and most of the works on view are made or adapted for the exhibition. But as she brings her work home, Abdalian lends it an intimate touch.

A dramatic swathe of red cotton, dominating a long wall, draws viewers into CAC's ground-floor converted-industrial space. The museum occupies two levels of a former warehouse for the shuttered pharmacy chain Katz & Besthoff, with a newly opened creative coworking space on top. From afar, the creased *Banner* (2018) resembles one of Tauba Auerbach's large *Fold* paintings of the early 2010s. Closer up, one can see words stitched in crimson across its rumpled surface: LET LIVING LABOR LIVE, LET DEAD LABOR DIE. A distillation of Karl Marx's ghoulish quote about exploitation – 'Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' – the motto brings a punk twist to a piece that could other-

wise rehearse well-worn arguments about women's work. Painted up to the edges of *Banner*, in a neat line across the length of the expansive galleries, is a personalised example of the artist's handicraft. In loopy cursive without discernible breaks, Abdalian has hand-lettered the names of tools without apparent regard for specialisation or function. One excerpt reads: 'whipsawaxe-mortiserouterbobbinnailsethacksawpush-broomswitchbladeironcottongin'. The project, titled *Chanson du ricochet*, originated during Prospect.3 in 2014, when the names of tools were read out loud at the New Orleans African American Museum in the Tremé neighbourhood. The artist has explained that the tools referenced labour on the site 'that was historically forced or coerced or overlooked in some way'. Here, the artist has reconfigured this script around her own durational labour.

If these works bear the traces of Abdalian's own hands at work, other pieces deploy recording or casting to pay homage to other workers' efforts. *Transport Empty* (2017), a sound piece made in collaboration with Joseph Rosenzweig, brings together field recordings from many labour sites – including the gallery itself – each followed by a silence of the same duration. The piercing waves of sound make the gallery feel claustrophobic; as the noise ebbs, the space starts to feel larger again. *The stone shall cry out* (2018) is an upright, lifesize resin cast of a New Orleans street paved with ballast stones. These large rocks balanced the weight on outgoing

ships, later tossed overboard to allow room for the ships to return with cargo. Abdalian underscores the latent association with the slave trade by her choice of location. The piece was cast from a stretch of Montegut Street near nineteenth-century rice mills and cotton presses, where raw materials, historically harvested by slaves, were processed into saleable goods. *Hull* (2018) seductively mimics the look of a ballast stone hitting the water, as the rock rests atop a sheet of dented gold-plated metal. Working furthest from New Orleans, Abdalian has cast small fragments, with Hydrocal, from a Tripoli chalk mine in Iuka, Mississippi, in *from chalk mine hollow (i-xii)* (2017). Now abandoned, the mine was worked by labourers who died of a lung condition called silicosis. The casts, each enclosed within a 13 × 15 cm frame, register the marks of their pickaxes, as well as evocative traces of red and blue from the graffiti that now covers the cave.

Within the exhibition, Abdalian has also curated a film programme with six documentaries by artists including Allan Sekula, Kevin Jerome Everson and Flora M'mbugu-Schelling. She writes that these films 'endeavour to ascribe meaning to work'. Rather than a didactic supplement to her exhibition, however, the programme may be considered a material extension of it. In her insistence on activating the materials of labour, and letting them be read as such, the artist also makes work of meaning and meaning of work. *Wendy Vogel*



Hull, 2018, ballast stone, gold plate, 61 × 61 × 61 cm.

Photo: Alex Marks. Courtesy Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans