

ART NEW ENGLAND

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

Hampden Gallery at UMass Amherst

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OLIVIA BERNARD: DESCENT AND FLIGHT: TERRA INCOGNITA

When speaking about Freedom in *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran stated, "Verily all things move within your being in a constant half embrace, the desired and the dreaded, the repugnant and the cherished, the pursued and that which you would escape. These things move within you as lights and shadows in pairs that cling."

So it is with the cast and bound sculptures of Olivia Bernard. On a visceral level, her work captures the dualities of death and life, sorrow and joy, bondage and free dom. Through the passage of time and the journey from one world to another, the forms represent the spaces we embody both physically and spiritually, like the chrysalis left behind when a butterfly emerges, or the fleeting sensation of a ghostly spirit as it passes by, reminding us of our own mortality.

Bernard's relationship with her materials creates a palpable tension in the work as she tightens, knots, and twists plaster-soaked cheesecloth into a frozen gesture of flight caught on a suspended elegant steel hook, as in *Nimbus*.

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Bound conjures up many unsettling questions, with its charred skewer penetrating what might be the abdominal cavity of a female figure, the upper part of the body completely missing, the lower part plump and bound so tightly the "flesh" bulges out from behind the knots.

Bernard's video collaboration with choreographer Joanna Mendl Shaw animates the cast sculptural cavities with live performers, offering a glimpse of what may have once inhabited and then vacated the forms. As with the sculpture in the show, the video had a feeling of subjected consciousness, wavering between the ephemeral dreamlike meanderings of the mind and the physical limitations of reality. *Gabrielle Senza*

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