

Ruth Buchanan

Ruth Buchanan:

Put a Curve, an Arch Right Through It

Krome Gallery, Berlin

8 September – 3 November

Ruth Buchanan's exhibition throws a curveball from its outset, being described in the handout as merely the 'preface' to an artist's book, *The Weather, A Building* (2012), to be published at the show's close. That volume has a specific subject: the State Library of Berlin, whose past, so Wikipedia tells us, is a chequered one. One of the largest libraries in the world, its contents have been variously burned by the Nazis and scattered during the war and Allied occupation (1.5 million books were hidden in one mine, for example), and for the above and other reasons, 700,000 copies of books were lost during this period. The venue, meanwhile, has split and doubled, straddling East and West Berlin, and is now called 'the library in two homes'.

Those historical facts feel germane to the New Zealand artist's small, controlled yet structurally blurry show, which is at least in part concerned with knowledge and embodiments of memory. One enters it through *Cast a Light Across It* (2012), a chiffon curtain: a simple divider as one enters it and, by the time one exits, a kind of metaphoric membrane. Right next to it is *Furniture, Plan, Rival Brain* (2012), a photograph of a sheet of wood evenly punctured with circlets – like an arty version of Connect 4 – from whose lower right corner a cache of shiny silvery discs is tumbling out of frame, like information escaping brain cells, although the work's title suggests it could represent several different things. Nearby, on a large, slightly tipped-back screen, is *Tilt* (2010), a three-minute 16mm film (transferred to video) of a hand passing repeatedly over a white surface: this, apparently, represents the manual manipulation of a microfiche, as in a library. In a vitrine, meanwhile, is a motley array of objects that includes a handmade rug featuring a sort of Constructivist design, and a lumpy green papier mâché sculpture; if the former speaks of the laboriously sustained past, the latter is the sort of amorphous shape that it's hard to remember.

Meanwhile, and from the divider onwards, the show's elements (repurposed in part from a 2011 exhibition at Hopkinson Cundy Gallery in Auckland) theatricalise the space. One is encouraged to think of the room as a metaphor

for the mind, its constituents as either nudges towards such a reading (eg, the photograph); objects speaking of memory and retention (the rug); or 'lossy' articulations of remembering (the video, which should show a microfiche but it isn't there). The exhibition starts to position itself as a self-conscious survey of processes relating to recall, one echoing the circuitous narrative – encompassing imperilment and restoration – of the Berlin State Library.

And the overlay of that narrative reminds us, in turn, that the show is in part a pragmatic response to a city one has been asked to show in; that and its history. Accordingly, this show 'about' memory reveals itself as more concerned with the delicate, sometimes tilted, conditions of artmaking with relation to the contingencies of practice, thematic and geographic. Not least because, however much one valorises what's on show, it's been positioned upfront as a mere prelude of something that's yet to come, whose particular shape is a piece of knowledge our brains don't hold.

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ArtReview
Issue 64 December 2012

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Put a Curve, an Arch Right Through It, 2012 (installation view).
Courtesy Krome Gallery, Berlin,
and Hopkinson Cundy, Auckland

