

Art Review:

Esther Kläs: Better Energy

[MoMA PS1, New York](#)

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In the photograph that the Peter Blum gallery sent out to announce the opening of Esther Kläs's exhibition Better Energy at MoMA PS1, three of the artist's totemic sculptures – turquoise, charcoal and yellow, respectively – are depicted on a rooftop overlooking the skyline of Manhattan, as if paying homage to the city. Mistakenly thinking that this was an image of the installation, I was informed at the ticket counter that the PS1 rooftop is not open to the public.

Although the sculptures would have been epic on the roof, given that they radiate a solemn kind of energy reminiscent of that emitted by skyscrapers, they hardly disappoint in the galleries. Kläs, working alone in the studio, constructs the work using basic forms of casting. The materials – concrete, resin, ceramic, plaster, pigment – dictate the final form of each piece. In essence, a support structure is made by the artist and then enveloped, whole, by a second skin.

The resulting works are anthropomorphic, scaled to the size of Kläs's body – very literally in works like Sap (2010), which includes a frame of woven mat delineating a blank wall space, under which lies a hokey Hydrocal plaster lifecast of the artist's hand, cut off at midforearm, as if she were a ghost trying to crawl through the wall – and more powerfully in weightier pieces that stand alone in the centre of each room. These include M (2012), a dirty white monolith made out of burlap, Structure-Lite, concrete and Styrofoam, which looks like a classic Greek marble figurine draped in a shroud; and (5) RA (2012), four open frames of different heights made from concrete, pigment and wire mesh, which recall a miniature Stonehenge. If pictures of both (5) RA and Stonehenge were taken when they were silhouetted against the sunset, and placed alongside a similarly lit image of Manhattan's skyline as seen over the East River, it would be difficult to distinguish between the three.

Surprisingly arresting is (From a Distance) (2012), a wispy slip of neon-pink acrylic unevenly streaked on torn paper, which looks as though its edges are being lifted by an invisible trail of breath. Weaker are works such as Hold (Ex. 1) (2012), a slab of wood imbued with Pepto-Bismol pink pigment and notched at a 90-degree angle to another plank, which looks amateur, as does RD (2011), a charcoal drawing of two hands encircling a mass of freeform circles. Kläs's works, at least those in this exhibition, are best when they eschew figuration.

With these few exceptions, the installation has a powerful presence. The sculptures are a dignified species, formless spirits that would float freely if only they were not contained by the materials of which they are made.