

Like any artist, Hesse made work in a particular context – in her case, New York in the 1960s. New materials were important to fellow artists such as Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra and Robert Smithson, who were also using materials that were originally soft and flexible, including aluminium, latex rubber, plastic, lead, polythene, copper, felt, chicken-wire, dirt and glue. Louise Bourgeois had used latex to make a series of radical small sculptures in the early sixties. Of crucial importance to the ideas out of which her works grew were her friendships with artists such as Bochner and LeWitt, and other

artists such as Ruth Vollmer.

Hesse was aware that she was producing works that were ephemeral, but this problem was of less concern to her than the fact that she simply wanted to work with materials that had a temporal dimension. As she stated in an interview with Cindy Nemser in 1970, 'Life doesn't last; art doesn't last'. For Briony Fer, the value in these works, however, can be found in the observation that 'they are not universal and timeless, but leave us with a sense of a first encounter with things, the kind of encounter we had before we knew how to make sense of them.'

*Exhibition organised by The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
in collaboration with Camden Arts Centre, London; Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.*

The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 5 August – 25 October 2009
Camden Arts Centre, London, 11 December 2009 – 7 March 2010
Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 13 May – 1 August 2010
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Eva Hesse Studiowork

Curated by Briony Fer and Barry Rosen

Edinburgh Art Festival Exhibition
5 August – 25 October 2009

Mon–Sat 11am–6pm, Sun 12–5pm

Extended Festival Opening Hours 5–31 Aug 10am–7pm daily

The German-born, American artist Eva Hesse (1936–1970) played a central role in the radical transformation of sculptural practice in the 1960s. Hesse belonged to a generation of artists, including Bruce Nauman and Andy Warhol, which expanded the conceptual and technical possibilities for art. The Fruitmarket Gallery is extremely privileged to present a group of rarely seen works that show the inner workings of Hesse's studio practice. The objects, both small and large, range between raw material experiments to works in their own right, all of them revealing process and the moments between thinking and making.

The Fruitmarket Gallery

Market Street, Edinburgh
www.fruitmarket.co.uk



Over the course of her career, Hesse produced a range of experimental works that until now have not been recognized as an important subject of research. In the past they have been referred to as test pieces or prototypes, and valued as models or studies for large-scale works. In this exhibition, the art historian Briony Fer reevaluates these works, renaming them 'studiowork', works that can be understood as 'thought-experiments', works that capture moments of experimentation, where Hesse is trying out ideas and techniques and discovering new possibilities for her sculptural practice. Neither simply preparatory nor necessarily finished works in their own right, many of the studioworks exist slightly beneath the threshold of sculpture – but also question what we think sculpture is. Presenting the studiowork together with larger works dramatizes the experimental and open-ended nature of Hesse's work as a whole.

The ground floor of the exhibition features works made from a diverse range of materials such as plaster and latex, painted wood, metal, sculp-metal (a vinyl and resin suspension of aluminum powder that could be applied over objects), fibreglass, rubber, plasterboard, cardboard, cotton, polyester resin, cheesecloth, wire, string and nets. Hesse's interest in using unconventional materials such as latex, polyester resin, rubber tubing and fibreglass and in pushing the materials to their limits – in an attempt to achieve thinness and translucency, or formlessness and density – meant that she produced works that are both fragile and subject to deterioration.

These transient materials make clear

the temporal dimension of art: they have time built into them. Hesse's focused and intricate actions and hand gestures can be imagined from evidence of their production: folding, pinning, piercing, cutting, stapling, layering, threading, wrapping, moulding and casting. Hesse's arrangements and rearrangements of the works were also important to the making of the work.

The studiowork's sense of the performative resonates with the bodily. Hesse's studiowork and large-scale pieces are often organic, suggesting parts of the body. Abstract rather than figurative, representation encourages multiple but unresolved readings of the works: eye-like forms could also be seen to resemble breasts but are neither. Forms resembling genitalia double as envelopes or limbs, but remain entirely abstract. Hesse often defined her work as 'absurd', and a strong feeling of irreverence resounds in several works. Playfulness and innovation go hand in hand in this work. Although often on a small scale their effect can be as visceral – or even more so – as any of the large-scale work.

Hesse lived and worked in her studio, a two-storey loft apartment on the Bowery, New York. She made her larger work on the upper floor, and the smaller studiowork on the lower floor, where she lived and worked. A photograph taken by her friend Mel Bochner shows many items occupying a table made for her by her friend, the artist Sol LeWitt. She used the table in different ways: to arrange her own work and other objects that might be handled, and to display the ordinary, everyday ephemera of exhibition reviews

and preview cards.

Hesse gave some of these small experimental pieces to friends – others she kept in small glass cases of the kind used in pastry shops, exhibiting one of them (as Claes Oldenburg had in 1961) in a solo exhibition in 1968 at the Fischbach Gallery, New York. Then Hesse placed the work in layers on each shelf. In this exhibition, the work is displayed on table-like plinths that loosely allude to how the works may have been encountered in Hesse's studio, temporarily arranged in groups on the work table, always subject to change.

For Hesse, the process of layering could be used to build up materials like wire into bulky, awkward coils, or to reduce a sculpture to its most essential elements. She used liquid latex that she painted on in layers, often over wire mesh or cheesecloth, which can be compared to the way she applied washes in her drawings on paper. Layering was important in relation to capturing light in particular ways, and could involve more ephemeral, translucent materials. For Hesse light was not an additional element to sculpture, but was 'there as part of its anatomy'.

One of Hesse's most ephemeral, spectacular and iconic works, *Contingent* (1969), consisted of a series of 8 banner like panels of cheesecloth, latex, polyester resin and fibreglass hung at right angles to the wall. For Hesse, each panel was different, and "in itself is a complete statement". In a panel in this exhibition, Hesse's work involved coating a length of cheesecloth with latex in one long section and adding a fibreglass and polyester

resin section at either end, mixing hard and soft surfaces to create a variation of clear surfaces. The fibreglass and resin has aged, mellowing to a range of deep golden amber colours.

Upstairs, a series of largely papier mâché works – never before shown in public – also incorporate layering. Papier mâché in itself involves the layering of paper strips dipped in a glue of flour and water to build up a form, often around a mould, which when dry takes the form of a hard shell. In some works, layers of other materials – short strips of masking tape laid grid-like over cheesecloth for example – have been applied over a curved mould to create particular textures. Hesse made detailed notes about variations in this technique, describing how to achieve smoother or more wrinkled surfaces; results of these variations can be seen in these works, particularly in the comparison between the oblong shells and the pair of half spheres. Just how these studioworks were intended to be encountered remains unknown.

Layering is central to the other works exhibited on this level, larger works which relate to the floor or the wall, or the relationship between both. In *No Title* (1970), a wire-mesh form covered in fibreglass hangs on the wall, an unwieldy projection out of which emerges a wire wrapped in cloth and painted in latex. Slightly earlier works made from papier mâché coated in black enamel paint or wound with cord hang heavily in balance. Upstairs you see how in these earlier works she chose to cover the paper shell, but in the later experiments she left it bare.