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Monica Bonvicini review - S&M gear has kinks ironed out

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Baltic, Gateshead

Between the power drills, leather tassels and saucy builders' humour, Italian artist Monica Bonvicini lets sadomasochism hang heavy in the air. But the audience frustratingly ends up neither master nor slave

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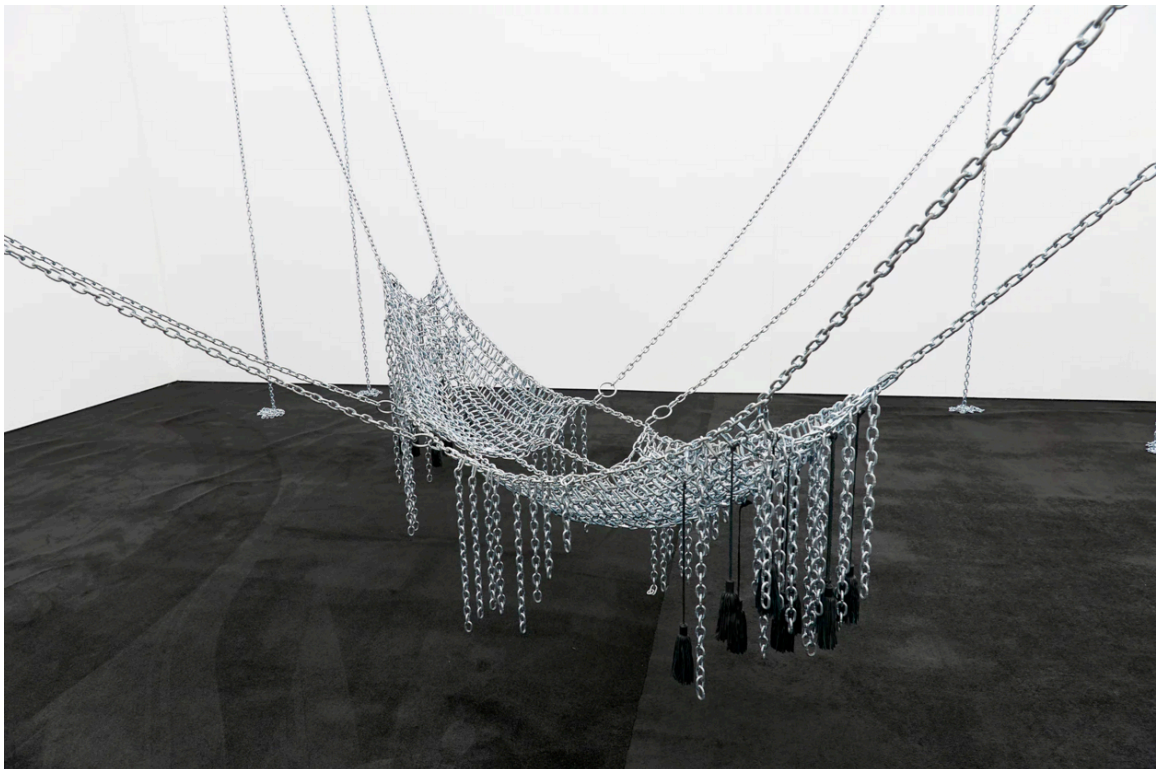


Monica Bonvicini, Satisfy Me Flat, 2009. Photograph: John McKenzie

A Murano glass strap-on gleams under fluorescent light, in a play area with the gear all waiting: chains and black leather, a dangling noose and a body harness slung from the ceiling. I have been in S&M clubs like

this, and so too has Monica Bonvicini. Since the 1990s such places have provided inspiration for her art. So too has the building site, the power tool and hardware store. As fetishistic as it is fun, muted as it is aggressive, her art is a kind of invitation. Her Baltic exhibition is a series of rumpus rooms, dark corners and sudden shocks. What are we waiting for?

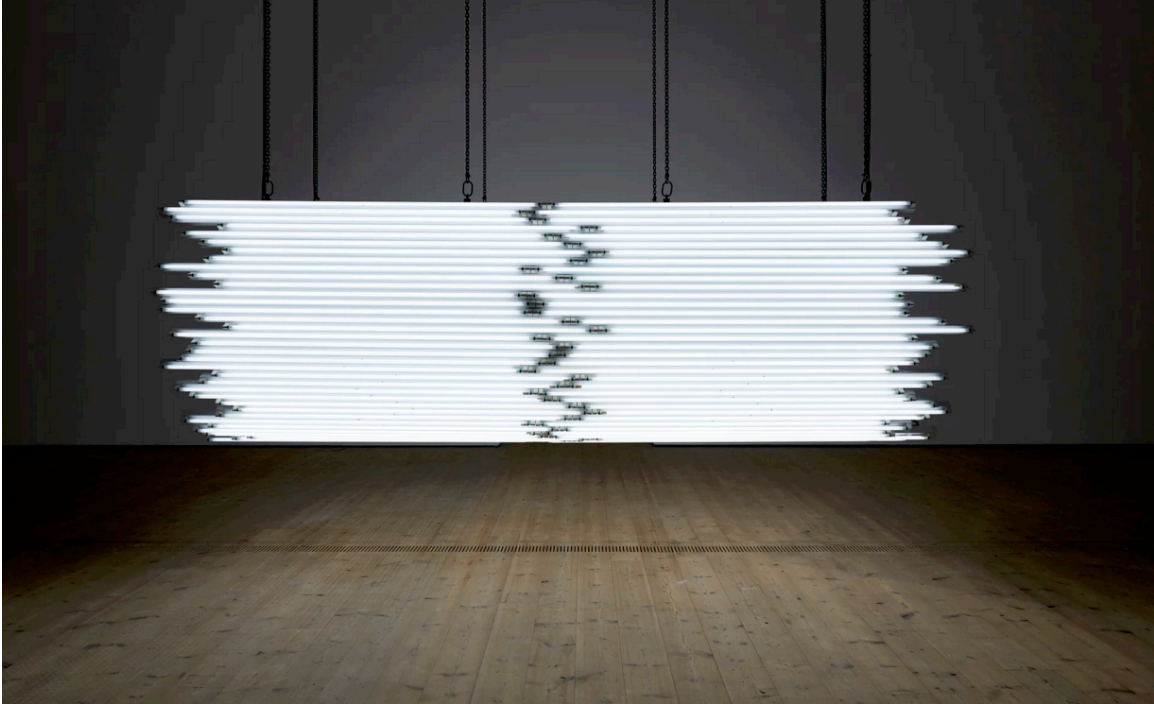
But where have all the kinksters gone? Perhaps they have taken the advice given by the sculpture Bonvicini made for the 2012 London Olympics. The outdoor sculpture, in huge mirrored and LED-lit letters, just said “RUN”.



Monica Bonvicini, Chain Leather Swing, 2009. Photograph: John McKenzie/Baltic

Boys and their toys are a consistent focus for Bonvicini. A hanging cluster of conjoined chainsaws hangs from steel chains; a hammock, entirely made of a super-abundance of chains, with decorative little black leather tassels, hovers over a black carpet. The aesthetic here is a kind of industrial rococo. All that's missing is the perfume of machine-oil lubricant. Galvanised and nickel-plated, chains hang in catenary curves, spool on to the floor, and sit in a rough wedge on top of a mirrored cube. They spell out the word Prozac and decorate a staircase made from scaffolder's poles that leads to nowhere. Everyone has their thing – Bonvicini's is chains.

Outside, guys in hi-vis jackets, helmets, tool-belts and abseiling gear are battling the wind and the rain, affixing metal lettering on the exterior north wall of Baltic. Below, a river the colour of stewed tea flows past. Satisfy Me, the signage says. In this weather? You must be joking. The same words are printed across a table under strong, hot lights behind a sturdy barrier inside the Baltic, in a corner of a labyrinthine installation of false rooms and corridors. This bleak entreaty could be some sort of institutional critique of the art gallery, and the promises it makes but so often fails to deliver. Expectation and disappointment are a constant. Maybe that's why we keep going back.



Monica Bonvicini, *Light Me Black*, 2009. Photograph: John McKenzie/Baltic

Behind glass, a hammer and a handsaw are sewn into body-hugging, tight leather suits. There's no chance of a sniff or a lick. They have the menace of dozing reptiles; ordinary things that can be turned to malicious intent or unlikely pleasures. Telescopic steel props lean against the walls, like bystanders. One has gold watches dangling from its handle. Another carries a little leather pouch. Is this some sort of dress code?

Nearby, a drill slung from the ceiling suddenly starts up, capering and spinning on its wires, a deadly dancer impotent in a sealed room, visible through a glass wall. A minimal black rhomboid is all strapped-up with belts, and so is the couch. This is art in bondage, but only to itself.

Wherever she shows, Monica Bonvicini gets apprentice builders to build their fragments of architecture. Anything can be art, and art often looks

a bit like this. Their structures are ranged about the floor, like slapdash rearrangements of Carl Andre's infamous bricks. In 1999 Bonvicini also began sending out questionnaires to building workers in the various towns and cities where she was due to have exhibitions. 'What does your wife/girlfriend think of your rough and dry hands?', she asks, and goes on to enquire why construction workers are almost always men, and whether respondents think there is anything erotic about construction. Heaven forfend, they reply, or something like it.



Master of her domain... Monica Bonvicini. Photograph: Andreas Lux

She asks for building-site jokes (the answers invariably lewd), and whom the workers would like to wall up, and how do you get along with

your gay colleagues? An entire wall at Baltic is taken up with a selection of 234 framed replies, in various languages, the most recent coming from builders in Newcastle and Gateshead. “She loves it rough”, answers one about his calloused hands. There are no complaints in the bedroom, according to the writers, and no problem with gay colleagues, though many claim not to have any. One respondent is the lone lesbian on an all-male crew, while another woman says that all the girls want to wear her tool-belt. All this is amusing, and mostly lives up to the often depressing stereotypes of a predominantly masculine workforce, though Bonvicini’s sample, and her questions, are hardly scientific.

Bend over. This is the only way, unless you are a child or very short, to look through the little spyholes set in the gallery wall. Each is a little magnifying lens, giving a view of a distant room, a tiny fish-eye distorted image of a gallery where a show is either going up or coming down, stuff piled up between bare white walls. Rooms, then, waiting for something to happen. Squinting through the peephole I feel like a peeping tom, but then I always do. We are all voyeurs here. But no one comes and no one goes. We could be waiting a long time.

One minute you are blasted by a hanging arrangement of dazzling white strip-lights, the next you find yourself in a quiet, dark cul-de-sac where an oversized image of a partly open door is projected on to the end wall. Suddenly the static video image comes to life and the door slams. Bonvicini wants to give us a jolt. It works the first time, but then I am inured.

Bonvicini's is an art of diminishing returns. In any case, you can get used to anything. It leads to an ever more extreme and eccentric quest for a thrill. "I defy any amateur of paintings to love a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe," wrote Georges Bataille. When people say they love art I often wonder what they mean. If I'm an art lover, I am still looking for that perfect object of my desire. Don't tell me it doesn't exist.

Monica Bonvicini's exhibition [her hand around the room](#) is at Baltic, Gateshead, until 26 February.