

HOŠEK CONTEMPORARY

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ARABELLA HOPE : ALL OUR HELIUM IS ESCAPING INTO SPACE!

Opening reception: 27 April 2019, 4pm-10pm

Exhibition period 27 April - 20 May 2019

Curated by Linda Toivio

Discovered in 1895 by Sir William Ramsey, a Scottish chemist, helium is the second lightest element after hydrogen. Formed in stars and vastly abundant in the universe, it is much less common on earth and mostly obtained by extracting from natural gas. Light enough to escape gravity, it floats through the atmosphere, disappearing into space; it is considered a nonrenewable resource.

All our Helium is Escaping into Space! is Arabella Hope's first exhibition with Hošek Contemporary, officially marking the opening of the gallery's programme for 2019. Held during Gallery Weekend Berlin, her solo show is presenting large inflatable paintings made out of Mylar, the material typically used for helium balloons. Necessary in medicine for MRI scanners and chemistry laboratory equipment, helium is equally needed for satellites, wind tunnel machinery, telescopes and deep-sea diving. Commonly also used for our entertainment and party balloons, this precious gas is escaping into the stratosphere and we are unable to produce more. Scientists have differing opinions regarding the future of this crucial element; some argue that the world will simply run out of helium within a few decades, while others believe that the gas' scarcity will make it so expensive that it will no longer be possible to utilise it for a number of important medical, scientific and industrial processes. Consequently, innovation and research in these fields could significantly slow down. As a result of inadequate policies and poor decision-making, helium is currently sold at an incredibly low rate, despite its value for humanity and irreplaceability.

There is something comical yet heartbreaking and very human in the fact that we are wasting it all on party balloons and ephemeral entertainment. Hope's aim is not to criticise people for their enjoyment of such objects, as she believes that no real change can be brought about by guilt or dread. Instead, she would like her work to address the complex relationship we have with these materials, whether positive or negative. Nevertheless, the state of the planet and the urgency of the environmental crisis cannot be ignored.

As the current generations are the first ones to truly fear overpopulation and climate disaster, Hope is examining our obsession with consumption and cheap materials through her cross-disciplinary paintings and installations. The use of helium is not the only concern with party balloons, which can harm and kill wildlife. Although compared to Mylar, latex

balloons are technically biodegradable, processed latex can take years to degrade. Helium-filled toy balloons can potentially rise up to an altitude of ten kilometers, before bursting into pieces. Despite their size, these fragments can be harmful for small creatures such as hatchling turtles. Most of the time the balloons will travel at a much lower height, before deflating and landing, often in the sea. Attracted to the debris, marine animals and seabirds are mistaking it for food and end up suffocating. The plastic balloon ribbons or strings get entangled around the animals, eventually strangling them. Such objects are also problematic by nature, as their purpose is to serve once before being discarded. Consequently, many countries have imposed bans on releasing helium balloons.

While the world is steadily running out of helium, Hope is looking at consumption and our insatiable need for more. Why do we have a constant need for (preferably cheap) entertainment, despite knowing the consequences? Why do we keep buying balloons for our children, when it is known since years that the planet's limited helium reserves are disappearing at an accelerated rate? What in the human nature makes us live like there is no tomorrow? We hold on to harmful practices and have a hard time giving up objects such as helium balloons, partly because of tradition and what they represent; happy times, carefree moments. A distraction from all the gloom and worrisome world news. Seems innocent and benign, but in our consumption era, such widespread single-use mindset is destroying our planet. The absurdity will only become apparent, when the crisis is at hand. China for instance, is already planning on mining helium on the moon. Predicting a helium shortage since years, Dr Peter Wothers from the University of Cambridge exclaimed back in 2012: "I can imagine that, in 50 years' time, our children will be saying 'I can't believe they used such a precious material to fill balloons'."

Void of helium, Hope's artworks hang gently in the darkness of the old cargo space, moving ever so slightly with the wind or the occasional wave hitting the boat. Each piece the size of a single bed, they seem to come alive, almost breathing with their glimmering plasticised lungs, while the light reflects on the metallic surface of the paintings. When standing quietly amid the installation, their eerie presence is palpable. Engaging with the history of art and mark-making, Hope's work is a conversation about painting, seeing how far it can be pushed and what it means. She is attempting to open a discussion between the high culture of art and the disposable cheapness of plastic. Thus *All our Helium is Escaping into Space!* is also a reminder, that everything disposable we produce today can last for hundreds or even thousands of years.

Text © Linda Toivio (based on Arabella Hope's artist statement)

PETR HOŠEK
MOTOR SHIP HEIMATLAND
CLOSE TO FISHERINSEL 3
10 179 BERLIN
+49 1525 7486496
INFO@HOSEKCONTEMPORARY.COM
WWW.HOSEKCONTEMPORARY.COM