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Review: Clay, staged to decay — a memento mori — in Phoebe Cummings' 'Cut' at A-B Projects





A raw clay sculpture, in Phoebe Cummings' "Cut," conveys the ephemerality of life. (Esteban Pulido)

By LEAH OLLMAN

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Phoebe Cummings' stunning solo exhibition, "Cut," was swept up in the [coronavirus closures](#) two months ago and has been in limbo, at the downtown L.A. gallery A-B Projects, ever since — viewable online but not in person.

The show is grounded in the elements: earth, air, fire and water. Beyond a deep sensory connection, the exhibition elicits the transcendent. Cummings' approach to the experiential lies somewhere between poetry, physical science and speculative fiction.

The British artist made the sculptural works on site, using [raw clay](#) that will shrink, grow brittle and continue to shed fragile bits during the show's run. On a small wooden shelf sits a piece with two stems emerging from a single chunky, tendril-draped base. Smoke-gray candles, aflame during my visit, rise from the centers of two flowers, whose stems sprout delicate leaves with cracking edges. The heads of two other spiky-petaled blossoms droop downward. Clinging to the base are several paper-thin ripples that suggest fungus from decaying wood.

The piece is astonishingly beautiful, a floral still life as memento mori — a reminder of the transience of beauty and life itself — but one that also enacts its own passing. Mortality is a dynamic process, whether for animate beings or objects succumbing to decay, and Cummings' unfired sculptures are both emblematic of, and actualize, that captivating dynamism.





A two-piece installation, rendered in a gray stoneware clay, speaks to the show's title, "Cut." (Esteban Pulido)

The other work here has two parts, a large stem with a conical cluster of flowers and the base of the plant from which it appears to have been severed. The blossoming stem, roughly human-height, leans against the gallery's front window, its life force seeping into a puddle of liquid clay and water on the floor. The base, entangled in ropy roots, stands on a crusty patch, a parched remainder quite literally turning to dust.

Rendered in a gray stoneware clay, with ample evidence of the artist's hand, these warped botanical specimens read as distillations, physically sumptuous but also shadow-like, monochrome traces of forms we know to be chromatically more vibrant. The show is decidedly titled "[Cut.](#)" Whether referring to the truncated flower or the familiar command to suspend filming — or an in-person gallery exhibition — the title suggests a cessation in time, a reduction.

Heat lamps and basins of water, in a walled off section of the gallery, create a hothouse atmosphere. (Esteban Pulido)

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Part of the gallery space has been walled off with a wood frame and plastic sheeting. Heat lamps and basins of water create a humid, hothouse atmosphere. Together, this room and the sculptures on the other side of the wall reference a 2018 installation by Cummings at an institution in Leeds, U.K.

The link between the earlier show and the current one feels oblique but not altogether irrelevant. On a bench in the warm, moist “reading room,” is a booklet with Cummings’ own brief, fragmentary evocation of the earlier installation.

“In here the real listens closely to the imagined,” she writes. They are words that resonate eloquently, considering the ephemerality on view at A-B Projects.

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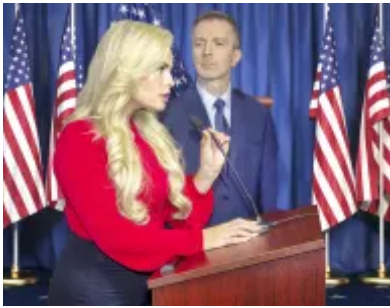
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