

VISUAL ART

Motion and physics drive cerebral works

Artist attempts to create meaning from a purely philosophical and scientific worldview

“Moving in Glances,” the cerebral exhibition at the Dallas Contemporary by Alicja Kwade, asks its audience to think continuously about what is being seen and represented — exactly in the fashion of its creator, who turns her exacting philosophical skepticism toward the most basic questions of matter and consciousness.

Born in 1979 in the Polish steel and mining town of Katowice, Kwade fled with her family as a child to West Germany, escaping the communist regime in her homeland. Today, she lives and works in Berlin, the red-hot center of international art in Europe, since having received her degree from the University of the Arts there in 2005.

Well-represented in European museums and biennials for over a decade, Kwade is only now seeing her profile rise in the U.S., first through her well-reviewed sculpture *ParaPivot*, which was on the rooftop garden of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, and second, through her largest two U.S. museum exhibitions to date: the one at the Contemporary, and its sister show at MIT’s List Visual Arts Center, which opened Oct. 18.

Questioning everything in the manner of philosopher René Descartes, Kwade attempts to create meaning from a purely philosophical and scientific worldview, one without the reassuring comforts of God, custom or tradition. As Kwade says: “Quantum physics is enough metaphysics for me,” and she states, perhaps exaggerating for effect, “I believe in nothing. No nations, no borders.”



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One clue as to how this works comes from the best-selling 2014 book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari, which guided both Kwade and curator Pedro Alonzo as they prepared this exhibition.

Harari’s book depicts a purely “scientific” humankind who, beginning from brute animal nature, created ever-expanding institutions of coordination and cooperation through agreed-upon conventions. For her part, Kwade’s show mercilessly dissects these same conventions, asking how we come to know or understand anything at all.

A typical problem she sets herself is: How can static objects depict motion? This is explored in one of the show’s sculptures, which represents the path taken by a gleaming metallic ring, about 3 feet high, as it rolls slowly across the floor in a lazy arc, before clattering to the ground.

That roll is what viewers are meant to imagine, but what we actually see is a series of identical rings placed at intervals, representing where the “rolling” ring would be, until it falls to the ground. It’s like a static, three-dimensional stop-motion piece, or a sculptural analogue to the way that motion-picture cameras slice motion into 24 separate frames every second.

Another piece, in the same vein, shows a vertical pipe “falling” from vertical to horizontal, appearing to descend a few degrees



Dallas Contemporary

In 60 Seconds, Alicja Kwade depicts the motion of a gleaming metallic ring as it rolls across the floor in a lazy arc before clattering to the ground.



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Fall shows a vertical pipe falling from vertical to horizontal, descending a few degrees each fraction of a second.

more each fraction of a second. And another piece, from the *Hypothetische Gebilde* (Hypothetical Images) series, looks like a mutant trumpet, with bells protruding in every direction. In fact, this is an attempt to represent the wormhole of Einstein’s physics, which is a kind of tunnel in the space-time continuum.

For another piece, the artist collected cobblestones, reminiscent of those in her adopted city of Berlin, where each year on May 1, International Workers’ Day, left-wing radical groups face off against the police in demonstrations, which include stone-throwing protests. (The most significant of these took place in 1987, when the severity of the violence forced police to withdraw for several hours, amid Molotov cocktails and looting.)

In the show, the artwork consists of a

Details

“Alicja Kwade: Moving in Glances” runs until Dec. 22 at the Dallas Contemporary, 161 Glass St., Dallas. 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Free. dallascontemporary.org.

set of such stones, thrown against the wall, broken to pieces, and collected in a pile on the floor. Against the severe history of May Day, seeing the gesture of stone-throwing reduced to a seemingly empty, even impotent gesture within the white walls produces a sense of exhaustion — of defeat by the forces of history.

Work like this is surely of great interest to a science-oriented audience, whether at MIT or at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science here in Dallas.

Kwade’s relentless questioning of “why” and “how” can be exhilarating for those who are willing to follow.

But her work doesn’t give up its secrets just by looking; you have to understand what she is up to. Thus, visitors looking only for what Marcel Duchamp called “retinal” art, which pleases the eye above all, may walk away disappointed.

Benjamin Lima is a Dallas-based art historian and the editor of Athenaeum Review, the University of Texas at Dallas journal of arts and ideas.