

Nicole Wermers

Tails & Fainters

22 May – 26 July 2025

For over two decades, Nicole Wermers has explored the physical and structural hierarchies of urban space in relation to the bodies – both present and absent – subjected by them, drawing on references from art history and vernacular culture. *Tails & Fainters*, her sixth solo exhibition with Herald St, presents two new, characteristically evocative and slyly humorous bodies of work that challenge the classical – and often male-associated – vertical trajectory of sculpture.

Combining seemingly unconnected items, the exhibition's title nods to historical names of British public houses and their street signs, which paired strong, recognisable images in times of high illiteracy. *Tails & Fainters* also refers to the two distinct bodies of work in the exhibition: *Domestic Tails*, hand-stitched faux-fur tails coiled around ready-made hose reels and cable drums; and *Fainters*, a series of sculptures made from reinforced air-dry clay, depicting female figures in voluptuous dresses, captured mid-faint as they descend toward the floor. The installation of both bodies of work responds to the quasi-domestic and commercial architecture and interior of Herald St's Bloomsbury location – a former antiquities shop on Museum Street moments from the British Museum.

Scattered across the gallery's two contrasting floor coverings – parquet at the front and marble tiling at the back – uncanny tails unwind from hose reels. Some are tightly coiled and orderly as if ready for transport, others stretch out across the room over the threshold, where the different floor surfaces meet. Their different modes of display and varying lengths (in some cases up to 25 meters) suggest adaptability to past, present and future spaces.

Wermers has been producing her *Domestic Tails* for the past three years, initially in response to a planned exhibition in a late 18th century *palais* in Moscow, where rooms once designated for various social classes – aristocracy, servants, and guests – had been converted to exhibition spaces. The building's spatial hierarchies, reflective of noble family life of the era, inspired these works. Wermers observed how certain guests were permitted access to spaces off-limits to others. Typically, beyond the central enfilade, the further guests were granted access along the successive rooms to more intimate quarters, including the bedroom at the back of the enfilade, was a testament to their social status. Of course, certain bodies, particularly pets (and, perhaps, artists), can traverse class boundaries with greater ease. 'I wanted to make sculptures that occupy more than one room simultaneously, alluding to domestic infrastructures such as electricity and water,' Wermers explains of these works, which one could imagine extending through doorways, up and down staircases, and perhaps escaping outdoors.

All of the tails have been laboriously hand-sewn in the artist's studio. In contrast, the reels are commercially available dispensers (an object category Wermers previously explored, for instance in her *Rockdispenser* (2010) or *Vertical Awnings* series (2016)). It almost appears one could pull out a quantity of tail and purchase a ream of it. Ruminating on issues of labour and value, Wermers likens her new works to being a 'bit like sculpture per meter,' and, as such, the Domestic Tails are distinguished by their colours and potential lengths: *Domestic Tail (Black / White Tip, 17 metres)*; and *Domestic Tail (Ginger, 20 metres)*, for instance.

Wermers' use of (fake) fur and its particular ability of evoking an uncanny presence appropriates her use of the material in previous sculptures, where vintage fur coats were stitched onto modernist Marcel Breuer chairs, and in *The Violet Revs* (2016), a monumental installation of customised leather jackets adorned with fox tails, draped over cheap plastic mono-block chairs, imagining a fictional female biker gang. This work is currently on view at Tate Britain as part of a display of recently acquired works in their permanent collection.

At the back of the exhibition space stands a group of maquette-sized clay sculptures of fainting women, seemingly collapsing onto the plinths that support them. Their voluminous attire evokes 18th and 19th century dresses, when extravagant skirts – supported by elaborate wire frames and tight corsets – signified privilege through the labour required to produce them and established a physical distance of the bodies inhabiting them to their surroundings (including other people). These garments could restrict blood flow, leading to actual fainting episodes, although fainting was also stylised, performed, even fashionable. Women were encouraged to appear accordingly delicate or distressed as a mark of refinement or desirability, especially when exposed to public space and the newly developing urban realm. 'What interests me in the idea of fainting is how fake it was, and how it became a fashion,' Wermers says. 'Very few people have seen someone faint, but we all have an idea of how it looks – this completely fabricated gesture we've seen on stage and in films.'

The *Fainters* continue Wermers' exploration of the 'sculptural possibilities of the exhausted body' seen in earlier series such as her *Reclining Female* sculptures of larger-than-life maintenance workers lazing, relaxing and dreaming on their cleaning carts, and the smaller *Proposal for a Monument to a Reclining Female* maquettes of women resting on products that sustain them: Advil, Charbonnel Et Walker chocolates, Diet Coke, and ProPlus tablets, for instance. This theme is also explored in Wermers' current exhibition *Marathon Dance Relief* at Lismore Castle Arts in Ireland, where she explores the Depression-era USA phenomenon of destitute workers' endurance dancing for cash prizes.

Central to these bodies of work are philosopher Andrea Cavallo's theory of *Inclinations*, in which she presents a feminist argument: historically, verticality – or uprightness, as exemplified by Michelangelo's *David* – has been associated with independence, and moral and intellectual superiority. In contrast, horizontality – such as a mother bending over a child or someone lying down in exhaustion – carries connotations of care, dependence, and vulnerability. Wermers' figures occupy a liminal state: 'They're in a frozen in-between state, between the vertical and horizontal: diagonal, *inclined*.'

'I think this archetype is particularly compelling to revisit at this moment, as the exhaustion experienced by these figures does not stem from something tangible or visible, but rather from forces that are intangible and invisible,' Wermers explains. Indeed, this notion of invisibility underpins both bodies of work: in *Domestic Tails*, the unseen palace that served as the genesis of the series; the absent bodies of the feline creatures; and the repetitive, strenuous, and concealed labour underlying their pristine fabrication. In *Fainters*, it is the invisible causes behind the fainting and performative gestures of these glamorous, privileged women – their camp sensibility evoking the societal expectations, customs, and prejudices that continue to weigh on and deplete us.

Text by Laurie Barron