

IN REVIEW

Walter Oltmann: Metamorphosis

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Cape Town, South Africa
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Reviewed by Jessica Hemmings

Hybrids of insects and extraterrestrials appear in the ten woven wire sculptures that comprise **Walter Oltmann's** *Metamorphosis* exhibition. Installed in the **Norval Foundation's** light-flooded atrium with a backdrop of the sculpture garden and **Chapman's Peak** in the distance, the sculptures menace and enchant in equal measure. Johannesburg-based Oltmann acknowledges the wire craft traditions of southern Africa that conjure creatures from bent lines are one reference point, but equally at play is what he sees as the material culture of his own German

family heritage of lacemaking, knotting and coiling, as well as gabion structures, metal mesh filled with rocks that are used as retaining walls to combat erosion.

The tension in Oltmann's eclectic references is poignant. *Metamorphosis* is exhibited within the impressive galleries of a private foundation in the affluent Tokai suburbs of Cape Town. Just over the road is the high-security prison Pollsmoor. The economic segregation of Cape Town which shelters phenomenal affluence and extreme poverty remains a cruel reality. For a visitor like me, the ubiquity of razor wire across the city is shocking. While Oltmann's chosen material may not intentionally suggest these associations, they are impossible to disassociate.

Oltmann recounts his early introduction to wire was made as a student from a scrap heap. The accidental find proved fortuitous. Since the 1980s, he has produced woven wire sculptures as part of a career that often draws references from textiles and the decorative without literally using cloth. While Oltmann weaves his sculptures, their production offers him none of the tactile pleasures of textiles. In place of bare hands, a hammer or mallet shapes these forms. To temporarily make the material more pliable, the aluminum wire is annealed (adding heat and cooling slowly). Anodizing follows—a constant current that can run through the sculptures because each form creates a circuit—and is used along with enamel paint to alter the metal's color.



Walter Oltmann, *Carapax (Borer)*, 2023. Anodized aluminum wire and spray paint, 80.75 x 157.5 x 19.5 inches. Photo: Anthea Pokroy. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.



Walter Oltmann, *Metamorphosis* installation, 2023. Norval Foundation, Cape Town. Works from left to right: *Capsule*, *Astra*, *Metamorphosis Revisited*, *Carapax (Borer)*. Courtesy of the artist and the Norval Foundation.

While the larger works command a certain drama, it is the smaller pieces that Oltmann describes as physically more taxing to make. The diminutive black spotted copper-colored “Carabus I and II” (2023) remind me of beautiful insects capable of a wicked sting. Others, like the bead-tipped “Instar” series (2023), suggest radiating force fields, while “Capsule” (2018–2023) and “Metamorphosis Revisited” (2018–2023) seem to illustrate the crackling of electricity.

For this exhibition, the largest sculptures were installed atop their shipping crates (reinforced to withstand the weight), which kept their protruding wires out of harm’s way but also made them a little distant, more like the inaccessible top shelf of an archive. Writing a decade ago of his early work “Silverfish” (1997) and onwards, Brenda Schmahmann reminds us that Oltmann’s references to the archive as holder of memory can be understood as particularly fraught in the wake of South Africa’s troubled Truth & Reconciliation Commission.¹

The archive comes to mind for other reasons too. While Oltmann may not execute his finished works in the soft materials of textiles, their presence is palpable in many of the patterns and



Walter Oltmann, *Instar III*, 2023. Anodized aluminum wire, brass rods and plastic beads, 31.5 x 23.5 x 15.75. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.



Walter Oltmann, *Metamorphosis* installation, 2023. Norval Foundation, Cape Town. Works from left to right: *Capsule*, *Metamorphosis Revisited*, *Instar III*, *Carapax (Borer)*. Courtesy of the artist and the Norval Foundation.



Walter Oltmann, *Carabus I*, 2023. Anodized aluminum wire and spray paint, 13.75 x 31.5 x 6.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

structures he works with. So too is one of conservators' biggest fears for a textile collection: insect infestation. The antennae of silverfish, also known as fishmoth, reappear in the "Carabus" series, growing to alarming proportions in the life-size "Carapax (Borer)" (2023) based on the borer beetle (or common furniture beetle). This recent version departs from the shed beetle shells suggested in earlier works in the series and is instead made-to-measure for the proportions of the artist's body. Without discrediting the intellectual rigor of Oltmann's references, there seems to be one more component unquestionably present: humor conjured in the absurd.

¹Brenda Schmahmann, "Neither Fish nor Fowl," *Walter Oltmann – In the Weave* (Johannesburg: Standard Bank, 2013). Reprinted in *Walter Oltmann – In Time*. Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture and University of Johannesburg Press (2024), 75.

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