

ALMA ZEVI

Heidi Bucher
Sublime Geometry

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ALMA ZEVI Venice

LONDON Office: Flat 1, 41 Davies Street, W1K 4LT London, UK
VENICE Gallery: San Marco 3357, Salizzada San Samuele, 30124 Venice, Italy
CELERINA Project Space: Giassa da las Barrieras 19, 7505 Celerina, Switzerland
UK: +44 207 493 6454 | Italy: +39 041 5209197 | info@almazevi.com | www.almazevi.com

HEIDI BUCHER TAKES THE FLOOR

SWISS ARTIST HEIDI BUCHER (1926–93) IS REMEMBERED IN VENICE, ITALY, AT ALMA ZEVI.

KAT HERRIMAN

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ENRICO FIORESE



ALMA ZEVI WITH HER HEIDI BUCHER EXHIBITION, "SUBLIME GEOMETRY."

The first time Venetian gallerist Alma Zevi brought Heidi Bucher to his floating Italian city, in 2017, she paired the late Swiss artist's sculptures with the late Gordon Matta-Clark's photographs of his cuts and slices into the floors of houses and other abandoned buildings. This posthumous coupling emphasized Bucher's radicality and her interest in domestic architecture by introducing her "skinnings," a sculptural series in which the artist captured the physical footprints of personally significant interiors in latex, crushed mother of pearl and the occasional textile.

This fall, Zevi puts Bucher's skins front and center with "[Sublime Geometry](#)," a show that revisits this seminal body of work but through a minimalist lens. "Materiality and the repetition of 'the grid and geometric forms are the major elements of the movement, and these are the ideas that Bucher's skinnings embody,'" Zevi says. "But when we think of minimalism we think of Sol LeWitt, [Agnes Martin](#), [Donald Judd](#), Carl Andre—their work is stripped of emotional references and has a coolness and a detachment that Bucher's directly opposes. Heidi takes the characteristics of minimalism and adds beauty and fragility laced with emotion."

My own encounter with Bucher's work at Zevi's gallery recalls the lepidopterist's study. Small fragments of tiles and floorboards preserved in fleshly plastic and conserved behind glass, as if they were organic rather than synthetic. I am told that the mother of pearl that dusts the layers of latex originates from Bucher's fascination with the aesthetics of water, which I understand better as I boat home through the alternatingly murky and shiny canals. I am also told Bucher probably came to Venice in her lifetime, and if she didn't she would've liked it.



INSTALLATION VIEW OF "SUBLIME
GEOMETRY." COURTESY OF ALMA ZEVI,
VENICE.

For me, the work seems to resonate with every part of Venice, a city whose own architecture is slipping into the lagoon yet precariously preserved for now. Bucher's floppy negatives of her studio floor and childhood kitchen seem to cling to and romanticize a bygone domesticity while still acknowledging that memory is messy, impossibly fragile and not to be wholeheartedly trusted. Her impressions of floors, like the gondoliers singing explicit sailor songs to American tourists in indecipherable Italian, stick a tongue in the cheek of expectation. Looking at them, I find myself homesick for a place I've never been.

After I make my way through them, I'm taken upstairs to leaf through some of her works on paper; petite collages in which she doodled dragonflies, another favorite subject, idle over Bucher's architectural photographs. "Just as the skinings are an exploration of space, her collages and photographic pieces are a continuation of this, where deliberate choices to record elements of architecture are investigated," Zevi says. "The collages in particular have the same process of 'action' of Bucher's skinings and the process; the cutting and sticking of materials, of adding and subtracting layers, makes for an interesting counterpoint."

GALLERIA ALMA ZEVI

Le sublimi geometrie di Heidi Bucher seconda pelle di architetture quotidiane

Silva Menetto

Cambiare pelle, rinnovarsi conservando ciò che nel cambiamento ci determina, ovvero i sentimenti, il nostro io più intimo formato da strati di ricordi, di emozioni, di sensazioni. Il lavoro che ha caratterizzato tutta la vita artistica di Heidi Bucher (1926-1993) è strettamente legato alla stoffa, alle trame, al tessuto, ma anche alle architetture di interni ed esterni. L'artista svizzera, che era specializzata in design di moda, visse a lungo in Canada e in California a cavallo tra gli anni Sessanta e Settanta, acquisendo tecniche nuove e venendo a contatto con i principali movimenti artistici dell'epoca, senza però affiliarsi a nessuno in particolare. Il suo lavoro di ricerca la spinse verso materiali insoliti che si potessero anche indossare. Nascono da qui i suoi "skinnings" (spellamenti), pavimenti, pareti, vestiti o oggetti di uso quotidiano ricoperti di tela su cui poi l'arti-



Heidi Bucher davanti a una sua creazione

sta stendeva strati di lattice mescolati a pigmenti e a polvere di madreperla. Una volta asciugato il latex, Heidi iniziava il paziente e difficile lavoro di scollare via la pellicola che si era venuta così a creare, come una seconda pelle, fragile e resistente al tempo stesso, che riportava geometrie e incroci di linee di luoghi e oggetti reali che diventavano opere d'arte. Su questi sudari iridescenti

restavano impresse in maniera indelebile anche le tracce soggettive dell'artista, le sue impronte digitali, i suoi tratti performativi. Di questa tecnica assolutamente originale ci offre ora un assaggio la Galleria Alma Zevi a Venezia, ospitando fino al 18 dicembre "Sublime Geometry", la prima personale interamente dedicata in Italia ad Heidi Bucher. Due anni fa la Biennale aveva già in-

cluso l'artista svizzera all'interno di "Viva Arte Viva", con alcune opere che la Bucher aveva realizzato con indumenti intimi femminili ricoperti in lattice. La mostra della Galleria Alma Zevi porta a Venezia i suoi "Borg", calchi in lattice di porzioni di pavimento o di pareti della vecchia macelleria in cui la Bucher aveva collocato il suo atelier a Zurigo. Ma non mancano anche "spellamenti" del parquet della casa dei genitori o delle trapunte da letto: oggetti domestici che attraverso questa seconda pelle raccontano una storia che l'artista sembra voler cristallizzare e rendere eterna. "Heidi Bucher: Sublime Geometry" comprende anche un collage su seta del 1954 che già evidenzia la tensione dell'artista verso l'astrazione. La mostra di Heidi Bucher è accompagnata da un catalogo edito da Skira ed è stata realizzata anche grazie alla collaborazione con gli eredi dell'artista, i figli Indigo e Mayo. —

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VENICE – HEIDI BUCHER AT ALMA ZEVI THROUGH DECEMBER 18TH, 2019

December 10th, 2019

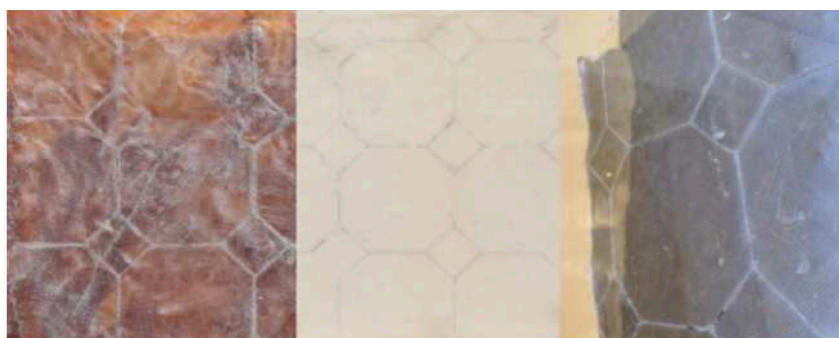


Heidi Bucher, *Untitled* (c. 1954)

With the [Venice Biennale](#) recently closing, only a few exhibitions remain on view in the city. Fortunately, for those who choose to visit this month, there is an exhibition at [ALMA ZEVI](#) featuring works by [Heidi Bucher](#). Entitled [Sublime Geometry](#), the show offers moments for discovery just as Venice harbors a wintry magic: in the quiet, crepuscular afternoon hours you arrive to this tucked away gallery space to find walls glowing with mother of pearl pigment.

Born in the Swiss town of Winterthur, Bucher studied textile design under Max Bill at the School of Applied Art in Zurich where she made silk collages that are enchanting for their varying degrees of precision and inexactitude. One work hangs in a corner of the gallery and invites closer inspection; illuminated from certain angles, it gives off a subtle luster redolent of a [Vija Celmins](#) *Night Sky*.

In 1975, Bucher acquired a former butcher's freezing room as her Zurich studio, where she first created her iconic 'skinnings'. To do so, she poured liquid latex and mother of pearl onto the tiled floors and walls and, after waiting for the cast to take hold, she peeled off the leathery film from the surfaces to create a physical reproduction of the space. In Bucher's hands, latex beomes a messenger from the past, transmuting, informing, and crystallizing its future self. The 'skinned' impression is unyielding and frozen in time, yet the latex seems to decay before our eyes as the mother of pearl dries to resemble a weathered patina. Linking different temporalities like chrysalises, the artist drew this parallel with her oft-cited saying 'Spaces are shells, are skins,' and in this same regard would refer to a 'skinning' as the translucent shell of a larval state that signals the process of transformation. In this way, Bucher incorporated latex and mother of pearl as a 'medium' in the truest sense: a mutable substance that records the shell of a space in order to release it from spatiotemporal stasis.



Heidi Bucher, Detail images of *BORG (Kachelboden)* ('Tiled floor') (1975–1977) (left to right) mother of pearl and latex on canvas; paper and glue; glue, latex, mother of pearl. © Quincy Childs

Bucher referred to the first 'skinnings' of her Zurich studio as the *Borg* series, which translates to a 'fortified castle'. This pun subverts, in a humorous way, the impression of those tiles, and the act of preserving them in an iridescent shimmer, to suggest the former opulence of a stately structure. Further wordplay in the show abounds: the plural form of latex is *latices*, a somewhat curious revelation considering that Bucher's latex is originally a liquid substance, so to speak of many would infer a connected separateness. When dried, however, this concept begins to take shape (quite literally) in the *Borg* skinnings. The exhibition features three such works that were 'skinned' in her Zurich studio between 1975–1977. These tableaux record the heptagonal-shaped tiles that, when presented together, form a lattice of latices. In the context of physics, the word 'lattice' denotes the accumulation of atoms at the molecular scale, and is known in this instance as a crystal. (A fitting nomenclature in light of the artist's signature use of pearl pigment.) What is more, the gallery's title sheet informs me that the word for 'latex' in Italian is in fact *lattice*, indicating yet another etymological opening in this trellis of translations.

Following the *Borg* series, Bucher shifted her emphasis to more autobiographical spaces. In a series entitled *Herrenzimmer*, she 'skins' her childhood home through a starkly new lens. She was particularly drawn to the parquet floor of her father's study, presumably a room she would not have been let into as a child. The resulting works *8* and *45 der Parkettboden* from 1979 therefore could be interpreted as a portrait of her father, suggests Zevi. She later 'skins' another family home called *Ahnenhaus* ('Ancestral Home') after hearing of its imminent demolition. She responds to this event by skinning the interiors to release them not only from their erstwhile states but also from their future disappearance, transforming the rooms into pellucid dreamscapes that would endure.



Heidi Bucher, *45 Der Parkettboden des Herrenzimmer in Wülflingen, Winterthur, (1979)*, latex, textile, and mother of pearl.



Heidi Bucher, *Untitled (Plättlituch), 'Flat cloth' (1981)*, floorpiece probably from Ahnenhaus, Winterthur, mother of pearl, latex, textile.

One such work from *Ahnenhaus* is a floor-skinning called *Plättlituch* from 1981. This work presents the tension point, like the central cog of a wheel, around which her aesthetic concerns revolve. The square cloth is comprised of corrugated chevrons that form, like most of her skinnings, a Modernist grid. The material base of this work, however, resembles a napkin or dishcloth; clearly a textile, the material carries an unspoken stigma attached to it as 'feminine'. (Notable women artists, such as Anni Albers for example, were initially redirected from painting studios to weaving workshops.) The 'skinings' thus present two contrasting elements that drive her work—the superimposing of the serial onto the woven through the medium of latex. This dichotomy is indicative of a Post-Minimalist interest in using the material world as a template for sculpture. Owing to Bucher's choice to cast architectural surfaces with geometric, serial patterns, e.g. tiled floors, geometric moulding, and napkins, she effectively uses the grid *to break away from it*. In this sense Bucher undermines, even satirizes, the very sobriety and assuredness of Minimalist predilections to liberate—and celebrate—the very imperfections and imprecisions that her contemporaries wished to contain.

What is more, Bucher subverts Minimalist tenets in her 'skinings' by taking up household objects to playfully overturn the rigidity of the grid. Her skinnings can be analyzed with regard to the parallel rise of Post-Minimalist art and Second-Wave Feminism during the 1960s–80s, even if these interests were not in the foreground of the artist's conceptual focus. Women artists engaged with Minimalism's recent legacy as 'a new archive of forms for different kinds of appropriation in the present,' (Wagner, 2016), and Bucher emphasizes the tactility of production by combining various methods of mending, recording, and preserving surfaces. Through her intensive investigation into the phenomenological experience of spaces, Bucher seamlessly integrated the contemporaneous themes of her peers: the architecture of public and private spaces, as well as Post-Minimalist issues of femininity and the body.

She unravels these tropes in two untitled works from 1979 in which she embalms two quilt sections by layering latex, paint, and mother of pearl pigment. These works continue to challenge our perception as they appear monumental in form yet minuscule in size. Bucher's decision to embalm only the facade of the quilt cushion allows for a pink blush of fabric to appear from behind the work's more mineral facade. The two- and three-dimensional nature of the work is balanced as equal parts sculptural and painterly, a dualist nature that recalls the strategic *tromp l'œil*s of [Claes Oldenburg's](#) soft sculptures. Further, her distinctive decision to embalm something so domiciliary and intimate as a quilt pays lighthearted homage to the unremarkable in life, that which is familiar yet rarely displayed—much like the interiors of a house.



Heidi Bucher, *Untitled* (approx. 1979), quilt object, textile, mother of pearl.

Another work of mention is somewhat of an outlier. Entitled *Spuren Gummirelief Rot*, this cerulean and fuchsia work protrudes from the wall with excrement. We know that it was made in the early 1980s, however only Bucher knew precisely where it was 'skinned'. The mysterious origins of the work lend it an enduring and timeless mystique when viewed up-close, quite like how a seashell amplifies what sounds like the ocean through an ambient resonance in the cavity. Despite the simplicity of this phenomenon, we rather choose to believe in a more surreal conjuring, which is that the common saying that a shell echoes its origins. In a similar way, Bucher transforms the pattern of scalloped floor tiles to resemble fish scales or an opaline conk shell, giving the work the impression that it was washed-up from the Venetian lagoon into the gallery and hung to dry.

Like a cryptic message for a detective, the artist's fingerprints upon this work allow us to trace her sequence of movements upon the tiles, as though they form a cartographic grid of digital topography. This work thus underscores the incredibly tactile process that Bucher undertook to make her 'skinings'. The visibility of her fingerprints remind us, once more, of the calcified layering that makes up a seashell. The pearly smudges of her touch evoke the shiny nacre of a seashell, which occurs when crystal aragonite platelets diffract light. She extends this analogy with each smoothing gesture upon the pearl pigment: pressing down layer after layer until the 'skinning' bears resemblance to the exoskeleton of an invertebrate. Rather than displacing nature into the art space, Bucher displaces art to disguise itself as nature.



Heidi Bucher, *Spuren Gummirelief Rot* (c. 1980), latex, cotton, mother of pearl.

Following this line of logic, *Sublime Geometry* rings with a prescient lucidity after the recent flooding in Venice, where water levels reached 1.87 meters (6 feet, 1 inch) above sea level in mid-November. As historic buildings are increasingly exposed to interloping saltwater, the very architecture that defines the city is at risk of depletion through a process of salt crystallization. This occurs when readily soluble salts from the lagoon seep into building facades where they form lattice-shapes, bloom, and expand; this crystallization creates pressure overtime that can destroy a building's masonry structure. This poses a great threat to Venice's many wall paintings and frescoes, not to mention its distinct vernacular of Gothic lancet arches combined with Byzantine and Ottoman influences. For an artist so fascinated by the ocean, historic buildings, and crystallization, the growing threat of saltwater to the architectural shell of Venice due to climate change would have been of particular interest to Bucher. Perhaps she had in mind this future plight when drafting plans for a 'skinning' to exhibit in Venice, much in the same vein as Lord Byron who wrote in 1818: *O Venice! Venice! when thy marble walls / Are level with the waters, there shall be / A cry of nations o'er thy sunken halls, / A loud lament along the sweeping sea!*

In a somewhat Rothkian vein, Bucher turns to black at the end of her life with her final floor 'skinnings'. The spiky tesserae of the latex in *Boden Dunkel*, 1991, demonstrates an incredibly deft handiwork that is testimony to her decades-long investigation of the material. Zevi has insightfully placed this work adjacent to her early silk collage from 1954, creating a sense of circularity that ties together the show. These adjacent works, never before exhibited, share numerous affinities despite the chasm that marks their chronology: they both feature grids that deviate with an almost imperceptible caper leaving the matrixes askew. Although Bucher was certainly capable of aligning those squares (her numerous casts of tiles record perfect grid systems), what is rather at stake in these works is her ploy to deceive our perception. Through toying with materials, she prompts us to reconsider that which we take for granted in our perception of the phenomenal world.



Heidi Bucher, *Boden Dunkel*, (*Dark Floor Piece*), (1991), latex, textile.

The 'skinnings' on display present a prevailing paradox in form: they look at once durable and fragile, mutable and indissoluble; they are at first glance ethereal to behold, and yet when one looks closely, their surfaces appear to sphacelate before our eyes. The lighter works recall gauzy surgical dressings stretched to a gossamer translucence. The thicker skinnings, having grown tawny overtime, almost resemble a thin layer of flayed skin itself, invoking the explicit sobriquet of her practice. The show thus wrestles precisely with these dichotomies: the twofold process of simultaneously constructing and deconstructing space, casting moulds of a room only to cast away the 'skins'. Central to Bucher's concern was to create an indexical mark that was portable. Through her 'skinnings' she transformed rooms into dynamic, moveable entities to be freely exported, as something more plastic, something more free – like the memories they conjure. After all, as Bucher's son Mayo shared with me, *her work was all about freedom*.

– Q. Childs

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November 20th, 2019

Heidi Bucher at Alma Zevi



Artist: Heidi Bucher

Venue: Alma Zevi, Venice

Exhibition Title: Sublime Geometry

Note: Additional essays associated with the exhibition by Liv Cuniberti, Allegra Pesenti, and Elena Foster can be downloaded [here](#).

Date: August 31 – December 18, 2019

[Click here to view slideshow](#)

Full gallery of images, press release, and link available after the jump.



Images:



Images courtesy of Alma Zevi, Venice. Photos by Enrico Fiorese.

Press Release:

Alma Zevi is pleased to present *Heidi Bucher: Sublime Geometry*, the first solo exhibition of the Swiss artist in Italy. Heidi Bucher (b. 1926 Winterthur, Switzerland; d. 1993, Brunnen, Switzerland) attended the School of Applied Arts in Zurich (1942-1946) and worked extensively in the U.S. and Switzerland throughout her career. In 2017, her work was included in the 57th Venice Biennale, Italy, *Viva Arte Viva*, curated by Christine Macel. Contemporaneously, Alma Zevi organized *FLOORS*, an exhibition which paired Bucher's work with seminal photography by Gordon Matta-Clark.

Heidi Bucher: Sublime Geometry charts the artist's radical explorations of architectural and domestic spaces, whilst placing her in dialogue with Minimalism in the mid-20th century. Bucher spent her most formative years in California and New York in the 1960s and early 1970s, although did not align herself with any specific artistic movement. The exhibition analyses Bucher's subversive relationship with Minimalism, as seen in the language employed by artists such as Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Agnes Martin. Bucher 'broke' the framework of the Minimalism – and the grid – by explicitly inserting her own presence, such as fingerprints and performative elements, within her work. The Minimalist aesthetic required artists to respect rigidity and straightness of line, resulting in beautiful, but severe and anonymous compositions. This austere simplicity is reflected in the strict geometric forms that lie within many of Bucher's works, the most iconic of which are her 'skinnings.' To construct these, Bucher used latex to cast architectural surfaces, before peeling them off and exhibiting them as works of art. The skinning technique is exemplified by works in the exhibition such as the tiled floors and walls of Bucher's studio in Zurich: the *Borg* series (1975-1977). They defy categorisation; imbued with memory, Bucher's works evoke an inherent temporality.

The earliest work in the exhibition is a silk collage *Untitled* (1954), demonstrating that even as an emerging artist, Bucher had a nascent interest in abstract form. The exhibited 'skinnings' and 'embalming' of the 1970s and 1980s can be interpreted as an evolution from these early collages. The works on display in the gallery are layered and inherently three-dimensional, as illustrated by the quilt pieces (1979). Additionally, the parquet floor pieces (45 Der Parketthoden des Herrenzimmer in Wülflingen, Winterthur, 1979) are extracted from both Bucher's parents' and her ancestors' houses; thus evoking a spectral presence. Whilst they capture this ethereality, they also demand a close formal inspection. The motif of the vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines merge into the intentionally textured and wavering edges of Bucher's pieces.

Solo institutional exhibitions of Bucher's work have been organized by Parasol Unit Foundation, London (2018); Swiss Institute of Contemporary Art, New York (2014); Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris (2013); Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich (2004); Kunstmuseum Thurgau, Warth (1993); Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles (1972); Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montréal (1971); and Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York (1971) among others.

Link: [Heidi Bucher at Alma Zevi](#)

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