

LONDON

## Lucy Skaer

London Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE

Bloomberg SPACE on the ground floor of the London Mithraeum offers an exhilarating commission opportunity for artists interested in history and archaeology. The building sits above a subterranean Roman temple dedicated to Mithras and houses an impressive collection of 600 Roman artifacts found on site. For “Forest

on Fire,” the sixth iteration of the project, Lucy Skaer, whose practice draws on history, art history, archaeology, and nature, drew inspiration from the Tauroctony (bull slaying) at the heart of the Mithraic cult and from walks through the surrounding district of London, redolent, as she explained in an online talk, with the history of

the animal trade. Old names like the Pelt Trader restaurant, a street called Poultry, and Skinners’ Hall, home to the Worshipful Company of Skinners [one of the Livery Companies of London and originally a medieval guild for the fur trade] jumped out. Indeed, animals and their slaughter pervaded her polyvalent show.

Skaer arranged six groupings of paired cast bronze pelts along two walls and placed four altar-like tables in the center of the room, each topped by a large rock evoking an animal head. Though her elegant sculptures nodded visually to ritual and sacrifice, these themes seemed almost a pretext for exploring



THIS PAGE:  
**LUCY SKAER**  
 Installation view of  
 “Forest on Fire,” 2020.

OPPOSITE:  
**Pelt: Forest under Fire,**  
**2020.**  
 Cast bronze,  
 130 x 103 cm.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: MARCUS LEITH

the mutability of language, objects, and their accompanying associations. Taking her cue from Tauroctony iconography, which depicts the god Mithras slaying a bull surrounded by other images (identifiable, but whose exact significance has since been lost), Skaer explored how symbols are created and interpreted, and how their meanings shift over time.

Though the bronze pelts recalled ancient uses of animal skins for clothing, shelter, and trade, Skaer's jarring translation of a soft tactile material into hard metal disrupted our expectations and imbued her pelts with potential new meanings. A closer look revealed four distinct surface treatments. Reading the titles, it became apparent that the pelts represented fog, forest, glass, or fire—atypical and elusive subject matter for bronze. Combined in different pairings (*Forest under Fire*, *Fog on Fire*, for instance), the pelts form a pictorial language transcending any animal-based theme. A green pelt with "fur" resembling foliage laid over a golden pelt adorned with raised, flame-like marks becomes *Forest on Fire*. In *Fog on Glass*, the uppermost pelt is patterned with wisp-like forms, while the bottom skin is scored with flat, angular fragments

suggestive of glass. These pictogram surfaces reminded us of our own fragility, perhaps more keenly than the pelt forms themselves. As Skaer noted in her talk, *Forest on Fire* calls to mind the deadly bushfires that have ravaged California, Australia, and the Amazon as a result of climate change; *Fog on Glass* conjures a test to see if someone is still breathing. Thus Skaer takes a compact idea—the pelt—and expands it to encompass life, the environment, and human civilization while taking the viewer on a journey back through layers of time.

This interest in generating new meanings and associations from objects and images is characteristic of Skaer's practice and adds an intriguing complexity to her forms. When she was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2009, she exhibited 26 replicas of Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (26 being the number of versions that he created in marble and bronze); Skaer's works, however, were made from compressed coal, resolutely grounding the soaring aspirations of the originals and posing questions about material value. The series was called "Black Alphabet," underscoring her interest in breaking down objects into a visual lexicon.

In contrast with the



heavily worked pelts, the smooth slate altars in "Forest on Fire" were pared back to their essence, each rough-hewn rock-head decorated with a simple eye. Skaer demarcated the exhibition space with a bronze ring, creating a threshold that reinforced the distinction between reality

outside and the magical world inside, where creativity, history, and myth converged. Enter this enchanted arena, she seemed to say, where beguiling connections happen, tables become beasts, and pelts become forests or fog, and allow your fantasy to run free.

—ELIZABETH FULLERTON