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Casavecchia, Barbara: Inge Mahn
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INGE MAHN
Converso, Milan, Italy

Everything seems pretty straightforward in this exhibition by Inge Mahn, beginning with its title: 'Snake, Swings, Caravan', which enumerates, in reverse order of appearance, the show's three sculptures. The exhibition's elegance and intensity lie in the interplay between these works and the unusual architecture that hosts them, as well as in the artist's ability to confront mutability and ingenuity – as in a monumental game of rock, paper, scissors.

Converso owes its name and twin spaces to the desecrated baroque church of San Paolo Converso, housing the tarnished 16th-century frescoes by the Cremonese brothers Antonio and Giulio Campi and an illusionistic *quadratura* suggestive of gilded columns spiralling up to the sky. Mahn's milky *Caravan* (1976), installed in front of the main altar, is modelled in raw white plaster, her signature medium, combining abstraction and the human touch. The contrast between the solid majesty of the former church and the flimsiness of the rickety mobile home is striking. Like the small 'house' that Mahn built in 1969 inside her classroom at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, then lorded over by Joseph Beuys, *Caravan* is a room of one's own that marks the boundaries of personal space. It provides shelter, 'as houses of worship once used to', as the show's curator, Gianni Jetzer, pointed out to me.

Until the mid-19th century, at least in northern Italy, churches and monasteries were extraterritorial havens, where individuals, guilty or not, could claim asylum. In a current era of 'centres of temporary permanence' – as spaces for the detention and expulsion of illegal migrants are hypocritically defined in Italy – it's hard not to read *Caravan* as a symbol of the universal desire for freedom of movement. And as for other plaster sculptures created by Mahn in the 1970s, representing bird nests and dog kennels, protection and captivity seem equally salient.

Next to *Caravan* dangle two *Swings* (1984), also in white plaster, suspended from the fake *plein-air* expanse of the vaulted ceiling. With ropes pierced right through their raised arms, the swings have the posture and proportions of two human bodies. They made me think of the story of the founder of San Paolo Converso: Paola Ludovica Torelli, countess of Guastalla. She financed the church (1537–49) and its adjoining nunnery for the Madri Angeliche (Angelic Mothers), an independent sisterhood she had joined, on ideals of communal living, spiritual exercises and social activities for the needy. When the pope (backed by the Inquisition) forced them to become cloistered nuns, Torelli freed herself from the convent and, a few years later, opened a secular college for young women. At San Paolo, only the singing voices of the nuns' choir passed the grate behind the altar, while their bodies were confined in the specular nave built on the other side of the wall.

Mahn takes over this secondary, bare hall with a surprisingly oversized, metallic sculpture (*Snake*, 2019), akin to a coiled animal, made for the occasion. The head and upper body of the snake, crawling into the wall, are formed by the pre-existing tubes of an air conditioning system – the only trace of the dismantled architecture studio that occupied these scenographic premises until recently. Instead of hiding the alien and cumbersome presence of contemporary technology, Mahn embraces it, and turns it into a part of her creature, shining under strong artificial lighting. It is a bold move, as well as an ironic one, given the sinful symbolism assigned to the serpent by Catholic iconography. It proves the artist's confidence in handling space, as if, after a lifelong practice, it was finally easy to inhabit such a room of one's own.

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