

Five Problems

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Five Problems is a series of sculptures that relate formally to Vexier (or disentanglement) puzzles, a format that is thought to originate in Sun Dynasty-era China, where it was seen as a 'wisdom game'. These conundrums, which involve freeing and attaching parts of the puzzle, come in a variety of materials –rope, stainless steel, wood, fibreglass–and their lasting appeal derives from the fact that they do not appear soluble. In Five Problems Eva Grubinger enlarges and reworks such brainteasers to the scale of sculptures that variously sit on the floor, hang on the walls, and suspend from the ceiling. Being too big and heavy to manipulate they are literally insoluble. As such, the 'problems' become mental ones, calisthenics for the brain.

The type of problem being worked out in each case, meanwhile, can be seen–via display strategies, scaling, conjunction, and choice of sculptural materials –to have large dimensions. The original objects encode mathematics, topological knot theory, logic and history:the sculptures make these aspects and others explicit. Some of the puzzles are Chinese, some African, some American; on occasion, where string is substituted with rope, the works convey an oceangoing flavour –spliced rope, knots, shackles –reflecting Grubinger's longstanding interest in the maritime as metaphor –not least as a focus for competition and imperial conquest. Others still have sexualised overtones of the body, suggesting that one intractable 'problem' being reflected here is gender relations.

Yet these rescaled objects, with their machined and sometimes high-tech look, are multivalent. In this context they might suggest luxury items, albeit perverse ones, in a showroom. They echo worldly things themselves: harnesses; safety materials that serve as psychological security blankets in perilous sports: mountaineering, sailing, etc. They suggest an aspect of the human psyche that desires risk, but on safe terms.

One might consider this –the human drive towards danger and conflict –as a component part of the 'problems' that the works' specific iconography suggests, while going through the process of 'solving' them purely mentally: if this part were moved to here, and then this, what would happen, etc. For centuries, disentanglement puzzles have been used as a kind of intelligence training. Elsewhere, purely mental techniques kind of

intelligence training. Elsewhere, purely mental techniques such as the 'memory palace' –in which one distributes objects around an imagined space in order to remember them –have been employed. Five Problems, in which near-abstract forms become highly associative, suggestively brings both techniques together to connote a variety of knotty cultural problems on a variety of scales –implying that, even if these appear unsolvable, we can nevertheless try and think them through.

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