

Flash Art

•REVIEWS

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Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili “there, but not” *Kunstverein Braunschweig* by Kyla McDonald



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Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, *Iveria/Taylor*, 2001–09. Photography by Frank Sperling. Courtesy of the artist; galerie frank elbaz, Paris; LC QUEISSER, Tbilisi; and Molitor, Berlin; Kunstverein Braunschweig.

I have always been struck by the quality of light in Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili's photographs. Their surfaces are luminous, their colors intense, each emanating a distinctive glow that either serves to obscure or intensify the work's subjects. Whatever her method of presentation, they are unmistakable in their radiant aesthetic appeal. This impressive grasp of light is clearly the result of the artist's command of photography's inherent qualities. She is adept at testing and manipulating its processes (both digital and analog), creating works that are as much about the techniques used in production as the imagery that is represented. Even seemingly neutral subjects — such as floral still lifes — carry hidden political or personal weight in her work, amplifying the charged ambivalence between image and process. The artist seemingly feeds off this ambivalence, recently noting that her “favorite thing is when things exist between definitions.” For the aptly titled “there, but not” at Kunstverein Braunschweig — Alexi-Meskhishvili's first solo institutional exhibition in Germany in ten years — the artist brings all this to bear, showing an array of work that illustrates her incredible ability to continually interrogate photography's full potential.

The exhibition occupies half of the Kunstverein's Venetian-style villa — six rooms across two floors. The first two rooms on the ground floor house two striking installations, each using floor-to-ceiling transparent fabric curtains printed with enlarged photographs — a recent signature of the artist. The first, *Swan Veil* (2025), spans the width of the grandest room in the villa, the *Spiegelsaal* (hall of mirrors), and hangs toward the back of the room. A repeated motif of a swan is printed on the fabric which combine with vivid shades of green and blue, with a bright white line that appears as if a magic fluorescent wand had been swished over the image. The regal symbol of the swan seems fitting for such a grand, imposing space flanked by windows, mirrors, and wall paintings. Alexi-Meskhishvili works with these otherwise incongruous elements, using the translucency of fabric to coalesce her works with the space they inhabit: the light flooding through the windows behind imprints their image onto the curtain; the impressive chandelier that hangs in front is reflected in the mirror behind, appearing on the textile's surface as bright star-like dots; the other mirrors in the hall reflect the installation to create multiple copies of the scene.

In the next room — a smaller oval-shaped space — *flooding the zone* (2025) is found. Several pieces of fabric are printed with a variety of flower motifs and abstract forms; they hug the walls, making a room within a room. Shades of blues, pinks, oranges, grays, and yellows all appear, which together have a kaleidoscopic effect. Again, the light coming in through the windows and doorways marks the textiles. As the daylight outside changes, so too does the opacity of these works. The images depicted are the product of several photographic processes — from scanning and digital manipulation to the “camera-less” rayograph, where objects are placed directly onto photographic paper and exposed to light. Here, the works appear in continual development as the light of the building undoes any fixity the original image might otherwise hold.

Proving Alexi-Meskhishvili's ability to work across a number of photographic and display registers, *Corset* (2009–25), exhibited upstairs, is an understated yet stunning installation of smaller analog prints from the artist's archive. With their often unassuming subjects — a pink toilet roll, a mirrored cube, and so forth — there is an imperfect beauty contained in these photographs that read as test prints. Presented on a mint-pistachio-colored metal vitrine that mimics how one lays out prints when they are developing, the work suggests an intimacy — as if the viewer were witness to her production process. In another room, the film *Ojeee Ojaaa* (1993/2023/2025), an ode to her native Georgia, show how different registers of light are a guiding aesthetic: light falls on the faces of a younger Alexi-Meskhishvili and her friends dancing at her thirteenth birthday party; light pours in through the floor-to-ceiling windows of Tbilisi's Aragveli metro station, where the artist's site-specific work *Georgian Ornament* (2023) is installed, with its playful take on traditional Georgian ornamentation; finally, Tbilisi Christmas lights provide an initial backdrop for the still-ongoing protests against electoral misconduct in the Georgian parliamentary elections last October.

Gestures toward Georgian image politics and culture — both historically and in the present — resound throughout this exhibition. The somewhat ordinary motifs of flowers and swans populating the textile installations were taken from Georgian napkins. As a form of control over individual expression under Soviet-occupied Georgia, flowers were one of the only images allowed to be reproduced — chosen for their assumed symbolic emptiness. They would later be reclaimed during the student uprising against Soviet rule in 1989, when red tulips became the symbol of resistance and independence.

The two halves of this exhibition, upstairs and down, each end with a large-format dye-sublimation print of tulips — *making food out of sunlight (twilight)* and *making food out of sunlight (dawn)* (both 2024). The flowers themselves become like ghostly apparitions amid the prismatic effects created in the work's production — the former has shades of blue and purple, the latter vivid washes of pink, green, red, and blue. The times of day noted in their titles resonate with how the time of day transforms *Swan Veil* and *flooding the zone*. More than this, they also evoke the cyclical nature of time itself. Georgia's current political situation echoes its history — through these works Alexi-Meskhishvili both memorializes the ghosts of her country's past and subtly emphasizes the political adversity that is currently unfolding there. The many-layered works on display here typify the artist's particular capacity for hiding meaning within the surface of luminescent beauty.