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Zoë Buckman First Solo Show Keeps It Really Real: Find out how this artist is shocking the art world with her provocative “body” of work  
By Felicity Sargent & Mark Molle  
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*Portrait of the artist by Jessica Malaflouris.*

Stepping into Zoë Buckman’s East Village art studio can feel like entering the mind of a manic pixie dream artist. A fragrant candle fills the room with an intoxicating sweetness that paradoxically blends quite well with the Biggie Smalls playing at café volume. Like a sprightly urban apparition, Buckman bounces forth in her Airmaxes, plaid pants, nameplate necklace before introducing herself in the sort of British accent that we genuinely wish would narrate every children’s book ever. But the spell soon breaks.

“Oh,” she abruptly turned away from us and toward the corner of her studio, “I forgot,” her eyes widened as if she had left something on the stove, “to plug this one in.” An with that we were back to life, back to reality, as that old En Vogue song goes, and it soon became clear, from her work, that was precisely where she wanted us to be.

Moments later, we were before a giant illuminated neon hourglass that will appear in her first solo show, “Present Life,” which opens tonight, Tuesday, February 24th, from 6-8 p.m. at the Garis & Hahn Gallery on Bowery. “One of the reasons working with neon really interests me is that it seems so inorganically bright, so unnatural, but it actually has a limited lifespan, just like organic life – once the neon runs out, it’s gone, it dies.” Buckman is unabashedly and authentically obsessed with life and death. As she walks us through each piece that will be in the show – a mix of sculpture, photography, and neons – its clear that, unlike artists who attempt to erase their identity from their work and either hide behind eidetic concepts or claim that they have no interest in interpreting their own work’s meaning, Buckman belongs to a new breed of disarmingly sincere artists; she tells you exactly what

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she's up to and what she's trying to do in an in-your-face, no bullshit way. This rising tide of "metamodern" artists understandably questions the need to make the sort of art that is "the life that tells the truth" when they feel as if they can simply make art that tell the truth. Their approach is more direct, less concerned with its intertextual matrix of referentiality, and positively obsessed with the heartfelt creation of meaning. "There's not much as important to me as authenticity," says Buckman. "I will always strive to be me, do me, own my shit and be real." Buckman sees no reason to hide her wiring.

The pieces in "Present Life" are disturbingly personal. Metaphorically, one might say that a work "springs from an artist's womb," and characterizing the emergence of meaning as a form of midwifery goes back at least as far as Platonic maieutics, but in "Present Life" we are presented with the artist's actual womb. Buckman plasticized her placenta. What's more, she doesn't let it stand on its own like some unnamable signifier, a placental aporia into which a flurry of pedantic readers may find some always already contextual meaning. More than simply acknowledging that "all art is autobiography," she's quick to tell the story of how every single one of her works organically derives from her own real life. Following the birth of her daughter, she explains, she was told that a defect in her placenta – that placenta – the source of fetal nourishment, could have nearly killed her unborn child, so she decided to directly approach that very ambiguous life-giving and potentially life-taking organ, freeze it in everlasting polymer and set it in a marble egg-like coffin for the world to see.

And those sorts of deeply personal stories, internal dialogues, questions, anxieties, and concerns with, well, life and death, inform all of the work in this show. The entire effect is refreshingly real.