Sascha Braunig's paintings thrive on a multiplicity of uncanny forms and forces: they play with light and shadow, flexibility and rigidity, fullness and emptiness, push and pull. These dynamics are made to negotiate with one another on the flat linen-covered board on which she paints. Braunig is a master of the trompe l’oeil, her visual effects ranging from the creation of depth and perspective to fantastical bodies, lighting and even movement, all rendered with carefully synchronized colour palettes.

In Warm Leatherette (2019), a sinuous form covered in quilted material snakes across the centre of the image against a matching background. Careful contouring gives the impression of the leatherette being wrapped around buising flesh or packed wadding, its folds offering an opportunity for intense light-and-shadow effects. A pair of forearms with finely detailed hands push a stylized burnishing tool into the quilted body, apparently working it into a more curvy shape. Painted in billious yellow, the subject is lit by raking light which causes bluish grey highlights and deep black shadows. It has a vivid luminosity, which produces a kind of visual giddiness in which the eye attempts to capture the combination of form, colour and suggested movement at play in the image. Although Braunig’s aesthetic and lighting effects share a smoothness with digital imagery, she paints from life, making small clay models for her subjects and illuminating them in her studio with bright lights and coloured gels ‘inspired by over-the-top movie lighting’.

The winding form in Warm Leatherette performs the contraposto of classical statues or the popped hip of contemporary fashion models. Braunig has said she is interested in the way ‘the female body is perpetually abstracted, reduced, distorted, or compared with inanimate objects’ in art and culture. Her paintings take up this concern, with forms that allude to female bodies, but also suggest the possibility of evolved species. Secoade’s (2014), titled after the term for the rapid motion of the eyes between fixation points, depicts a form resembling a human head, made of pearls or white beads, set against a background made of the same stuff. Refs and protrusions in the head’s surface hint at facial features but ultimately, the portrait remains blank. Braunig has described her subjects as ‘Ur-characters’ and ‘portraits of a state of mind or a potential state’, but words don’t seem up to the task of defining these states, and whatever they are is best expressed by the paintings themselves.

In La Maltesse (2015), Braunig differentiates the figure from its ground, painting the optical illusion of an anthropomorphic mesh silhouette stretched over a frame. The rubbery webbing, a humanoid form voided of any fleshy matter, casts a shadow on the orange ground while its surface gleams in the stark lamplight. It seems almost alive, vibrating with the strain of being pinned so tightly and threatening to escape its confines by flinging itself far away. For Braunig, the ambiguity that surrounds the vitality of her subjects is an essential part of her work, as she explains: ‘it’s important that there is a tension between their lifelessness and possible lifeliness.’

- Ellen Mara De Wachter

1. La Malhonnue, 2015
Oil on linen over panel
96.5 x 81.3 cm / 38 x 32 in

2. RCB, 2019
Oil on linen over panel
81.3 x 63.3 cm / 32 x 25 in
3. Saccades, 2014
Oil on linen over panel
44.5 × 38.7 cm / 17 1/2 × 15 in

4. Warm Leatherette, 2015
Oil on linen over panel
73.7 × 61.3 cm / 29 × 24 1/8 in