

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Chris Sharp

The Complex Simplicity of Faces

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The new works in Jonathan Baldock's exhibition, *Facecrime*, try to imagine a handful of historical time periods which coexist, overlap and collide. These different eras are drawn from the remote past as much as the present, whilst trying to imagine a distant future whose inscrutability gestures toward the ultimate and foregone illegibility of our current moment. It is a strange, fascinating and telling transaction, which reflects on the evolution of communication while speaking to some basic human truths.

The exhibition consists of two parts, a series of masks or faces, and a collection of monumental columns. Both groups of works are predominantly fashioned out of glazed ceramic and bear the marks of their making and the artist's hand. Approximately the width of a human, the columns tower over the visitor. Teeming with bright colors and playful variation, both the masks, and the columns, might seem to be a relatively ludic affair, but spend a moment with them and you will see that something much weirder is taking place here. The work is ultimately as unsettling as it is full of contradiction.

The first apparent contradiction is Baldock's use and inclusion of emoji's in the sculptures. Figures and inventions of the virtual and digital realm, emoji's do not have a material life. They are, by their very nature, immaterial. Contravening their virtual, insubstantial nature, Baldock has materialized them here, multiplied them, and inserted and festooned his sculptures with them with a kind of reckless abandon. In doing so, he conflates two different modes of production, the hand-made (i.e., timeless) with the digital (the now, as it were). But they also allude to a more fundamental relationship of the emoji to our own sense of self. I don't know about my reader, but I can remember a life before the internet, and when I was initially faced with the advent of emojis I was immediately offended by such an egregious simplification of my inner life and emotional intelligence. They struck me as nothing less than idiotic, or worse, productive of idiocy: idiot making. I swore that I would never use them in my communication and secretly and smugly condemned anyone who did (something of a luddite, I also said exactly the same about cellphones circa 1996). And yet, as time has gone by, I have found myself shamelessly availing myself of their iconographic shorthand to describe how I and others might be feeling. Never mind that I initially did so ironically – as if the specious sophistication of irony would insulate me from my own simplicity – what is interesting about them in the inclusion of Baldock's sculpture is precisely their essentialism and the extent to which they are revelatory of an essential tendency in humans. For although Baldock is juxtaposing these standardised, endlessly reproducible faces with his own hand-crafted visages, they both speak to the same fundamental and timeless necessity to reproduce the human figure, or more specifically, the face. It could be that this necessity – to depict the human face – actually testifies to a universal human quality. I will never abandon my belief in the irreducible specificity of each individual human experience, but maybe emojis are much closer to certain truths of the human animal than we might have first allowed?

Another point of Baldock's interest in the emoji here is its questionable future legibility. Having conceived this exhibition as a kind of ruin, full of partial columns and highly interpretable faces, one wonders if emojis themselves will one day be perceived the way we perceive ancient cuneiform text? Were they a language? Or perhaps some form of currency?

That said, the distortion of the human figure is not limited to faces (or emojis) here. Rife with ears, fingers, hands, all of which are presented in the most anatomically unsound fashion, these sculptures become further, if grotesque, parodies of the tendency to reproduce the human figure. And for all their ideas and reflections on the past, present and future, these are not mere allegories or representations, but actual objects with a complex material life that is all their own. They, in particular the masks, have as much to do with painting as they do with sculpture.

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Borrowing the two-dimensional picture plane typically associated with painting, they explore colour and composition as much as space and three-dimensional form. Indeed, it is precisely this preoccupation with formal invention, not to mention craft, that ensures that Baldock's work is much more complex than any one idea that might underpin it. As such, it is not difficult to imagine a distant, hypothetical future in which the emoji has become obsolete or forgotten and these works are marveled at as inscrutable artifacts whose beauty and careful sense of construction alone ensure their veneration.

Chris Sharp is a writer and curator based in Mexico City, where he co-runs the project space Lulu.