

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Edward Ball

Fault Lines

Exhibition text (March 2019)

Susan Sontag was right: we need an erotics of art. To privilege context and reference ahead of the vitality of the encounter with Jonathan Baldock's art is to tame it. Let its carnality leap out at you.

Baldock's sculptures make me think of skin, and how hard those cells work to contain, to give shape, to hold things in. The artist's most recent body of work comprises gruesome amalgamations of woven fibres, latex and ceramics. In April 2019, ahead of his forthcoming solo exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, Baldock produced a maquette study, which functions here as something of a prelude. The work is a totemic sculpture of six hollow ceramic cylinders, one atop the other. The tower threatens to topple at any moment. Wretched souls emerge from its bone-like surface in ripples of anguished figuration. A hand reaches out, searchingly. Tongues stick out in impunity. Hand-spun yarn spills from the cracks and crevices like entrails. Lips, ears and mouths protrude. Crass emojis pockmark the surface, in turns winking, guffawing and gritting their teeth. Like body language, emojis are non-verbal revelations – an emotive shorthand Baldock uses to monumentalise what the British 'stiff upper lip' does its best to suppress – our true nature. The unconscious gesture of Baldock's sculptures betrays them. They are at the point of utterance, of giving themselves away – a dam about to burst. The thing is, you often feel better after letting it all out.

Baldock's new series of ceramic masks likewise speak to the potentially thin veneer of our psychic realm. Simple rectangular tiles hover at the edge of figuration – sumptuous ripples and folds combine with violent insertions of other objects into the ceramic surface, hinting at faciality. Baldock asks – what happens when the mask slips? How far are any of us from this point? 'Mirror mirror on the wall' – they reflect back to us.

Baldock is also drawn to the knottiness of textile – weaving in particular. In his exhibition THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME at CGP London, 2017, a hybrid cast of monstrous characters face one another across a circle, as though in a group therapy session. The tongue-in-cheek conceit effaces something deeper – each seems on the verge of a confession. How exhausting it can be sometimes, holding it together. One character, an anthropomorphised pot, literally spills the beans. Another recoils, turning away from the group in camp outrage. Stitches and seams dominate as a motif. Baldock's forms are overstuffed, and the fabric is stretched to bursting. The skin they live in threatens not to hold. There are orifices everywhere, which bespeak desire, vulgar sexuality, shame, and pleasure. They are portals into hidden depths of the psyche – places we aren't meant to see. Yet the warm undercurrent of bawdiness drags these figures out of abjection, and into a poetics of reparation.

Baldock revels in the parts that we try to keep hidden – from others, and from ourselves. Cutting, stitching, mending, making-do – his is a sculptural metaphor of repair. To an extent we constantly remake ourselves. Baldock shows us the cathartic power of art and making.