

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Skye Sherwin

Jonathan Baldock

Camden Arts Centre residency text (April 2018)

During his residency at Camden Arts Centre, Jonathan Baldock has been emptying out large bags of wet clay, which he rolls flat, and fixes together to form tubes that he works over before leaving to air dry. Once the resulting segments have been fired and glazed a matt, stone white, they are sealed together like bricks, forming cylinders that are then stacked to make towering pale columns, which will be grouped together. They recall the thrusting, phallic colonnades of classical architecture. Yet the artist has flipped the suggestion of the pure, durable, chiselled marble that became a cornerstone of Western culture, on its head.

At times the clay has been slit or punctured from the inside to form openings, suggesting—like Lucio Fontana's cut paintings and ceramics—mouths, buttocks, vaginas or wounds. Walking around this tall but gawky group, we can discover short ceramic pipes extending outwards here and there. By turns crude and endearing, they might be droopy penises, noses or teapot handles and spouts. Where the artist's nude torso, modelled in clay, emerges from a column, two spouts straddle it. The improvised arms of snowmen come to mind, as does, once more, the classical world, with its ruined, limbless statues. Then there are the emojis, the grinning, winking, crying faces, the love hearts and the poos, which decorate the shafts like badges.

It's a resolutely anti-monumental approach that has hitherto seen Baldock mix up the friable stuff of 21st century life—domestic goings-on, fallible bodies, libidinal currents, rude jokes and cute asides—with references to modernist art and ancient cultures and their notions of pure forms or lasting values. He's previously employed a wide range of crafts including knitting, felting and glassblowing to do so. This though, is his most extensive experiment with clay, one of the oldest and most primal art mediums. Its qualities are uniquely physical: literally earthy, worked by hand and with overtones of dough or shit.

All of which makes it a far from obvious and partly ironic choice for a salient feature of these latest works: rendering the insubstantial pictorial language of the digital realm, emojis, in solid form. That ceramics are made the old-fashioned way is a point stressed by a cast of the artist's open hand. It extends from a column, as if trying to make contact, but the emojis underline that in the 21st century this is less likely to be physical than via a quick message on a touchscreen phone.

Pictograms scratched out in clay however, are also one of the earliest surviving forms of written language. Indeed, Baldock's research process during his residency has included studying the British Museum's collection of Mesopotamian clay tablets, which trace the evolution from pictograms into cuneiform script's semi-abstract marks, and the earliest of which date back 5000 years. Written in extinct Assyrian, they run the gamut of cultural life across millennia, from literature like The Epic of Gilgamesh, to spells, recipes, bills and love letters. The comparison is a tragicomic one, raising questions about what traces we will and won't leave to future generations with a cartoon cast of pictograms that depend on the continuation of digital technology for existence.

For all their limitations however, emojis do say something quite specific about our interactions in the 21st century. In the soundless, disembodied realm of SMS, they have emerged as a necessary shorthand for emotional emphasis. When texting, words alone seldom seem adequate when it comes to expressing 'tears of joy', 'grimacing', or 'thumbs up' (to name a few of the feelings the artist quotes from the SMS lexicon). The emoji is perfectly suited to brief messages and, as we might think, considering these clay shafts' suggestive gauged holes, the anonymous hook-up.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Though this group of columns ape the mute supports of the ancient world, they are not in fact, without sound. Lean close and you become privy to an audible internal world: a mixture of songs hummed and the kind of random thoughts one has when walking the streets; even stomach grumbles.

This gap between appearances and what goes on underneath is further emphasised by the ceramic masks Baldock has been creating using huge rectangular tiles of clay. Decorated in attention-grabbing glazes that veer from deep purple to tangerine, fleshy pink to shimmering granite grey, they are as exhibitionistic as the columns are retiring. Their features are little more than lines and holes sliced or punched into the clay, recalling Picasso's masks and, again, Fontana. There is more than a hint of the animal forces, the sex and ferocity, those modernist titans channelled. Yet it's mixed with a charming goofiness. Here a hapless grin is filled with pom-poms, the lips stitched together. There, more disturbingly, both the eyes and mouth of a mask are stuffed with fat discs bearing emojis, resembling supersized pills. Made with a cookie-cutter, Baldock's smiley faces inevitably recall retro slang for ecstasy: disco biscuits.

The melt between inner life and its outward expression that the 'love drug' is famed for, makes a telling counterpoint for work concerned with stunted expression. For these awkward ceramics with their rough seams, saggy holes and imperfect lines, the bridge between the internal and external world isn't easily navigated.