

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Aesthetica
Tactile Inquisitions
25 February 2017

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Holly Hendry (b. 1990) presents an entirely new body of work for her first solo exhibition in a UK institution. Using a variety of materials, from Jesmonite and plaster to foam, wood, steel and water-jet cut marble, she creates a geology of oozy forms peppered with comic elements, such as dog chew bones and spinning plaster teeth.

A: This your first solo exhibition in a UK institution; how has the experience working with BALTIC developed your career?

HH: I am very excited to be working with BALTIC. It is a fantastic institution and it has been great to have the support to realise a work of this scale and ambition.

A: You use a variety of materials, including Jesmonite, plaster, foam and wood. What is it that you find so interesting in these contrasting forms and what is it that you're trying to convey through their materiality and tractability?

HH: I like to use everyday materials like plaster and wood, and turn them into something unexpected through their eventual form or texture; plaster and emulsion paint that looks soft and malleable, or slabs of jesmonite that reference terrazzo flooring, coloured from bits of spat-out chewing gum. The materials and ways in which I make are very tied up in the thinking behind the work too, so there is usually this flipping between instinctual experiments and more thought-out challenges. There are clues of this in the work itself, like the layered sculptures which are a combination of precision cut metal and marble elements or handcrafted objects, and bulbous forms and leaky layers, where the orchestration of the materials has overridden my control. I think this combination draws you close to the work, to attempt to understand how it came into being. It urges you to feel to understand, to have an intimacy through tactility, and therefore mocks the restriction of this in the gallery setting.

A: How does humour feed into your practice and why do you think it's important?

HH: I would hope that humour feeds into my work in the details, the moments when people look a bit closer and realise there's a chubby plaster holding structural metal together, or that I've carefully crafted a spare sock from wood. These details undercut and play with the seriousness of some of the other material forms and gestures. They are dumb actions or objects but they have sincerity through their intimacy. They relate to both an absurdity and tenderness within sculpture-making, and ways to deal with the world around us – an initial cartoon sugariness with aspects that are perhaps darker than they first appear.

The humorous aspect feels especially important at the moment, in the hypocrisy of our time, where everything feels fake and outrageous and unpredictable. I see laughter and death as things that are very human, and quite tied together in that way, as things that everyone does. So in that way I take humour deadly serious.

A: Cross-sections provide new perspectives to assemblages. What are you trying to evoke in your audiences by offering up altered edges and spaces?

HH: For me, cross-sections act as edges to insides, turning three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional images. In examples ranging from anatomy and architecture to advertising, they are a cut or slice to learn and reveal. This action is usually led through an inquisition that helps us gain insight. I have had a long fascination with backspaces, or hidden sites of production, so the cross-section is a more direct version of this – a way to reveal what is behind the scenes to see what is going on.

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For the BALTIC show I wanted to bring visitors onto a different plane within the gallery, so I have raised a section of the floor to a point just below head height. They are brought up close to the forms that speak of the underneath – whether that is under our feet or under our skin. This works relates to flatness and archaeology. The larger lumpier sculptures that tower above and clamp to the surrounding architecture, resist the flatness of being buried below, and are presented out of reach, for us to only assemble in our imagination. Perhaps like the way that fragments of a person's remains or an object would be displayed in a museum, behind glass where we have to understand it's physicality visually.

Additionally, by cutting a hole in the space (where you can peek out at the city outside from within the gallery) there is this additional play on viewpoints – getting a glimpse of the city from above while thinking about buried, structural and archaeological things below.

A: Layers of different colours and textures all add up to a portion-like sculpture – whether it resembles a portion of the landscape or stacked food items. Do you think there's an element of abstraction to your practice?

HH: I think it is more about exaggeration and imagination than abstraction. By that, I mean that the works represent simplified portions or impressions of things, as you mentioned, but through their simplification I am trying to highlight the specific aspects of a variety of sources. A good example of this is the use of the rawhide dog chew bones in some of my works – it is a literal and conceptual impression of a bone – made from wet rawhide skin which is rolled and compressed into a bone-shaped mould, hardened and given to dogs, who would appreciate it in any shape or form.

But somehow we are more capable to dealing with this bone-shaped compression of skin than if it is (or is the shape of) a real bone that our dog will gnaw on. Saying that, it's funny that our actual bones are made up of collagen like our skin, so it's a really cyclical thing that's going on.

A: How do you begin each work and how does it evolve during the process?

HH: It differs depending on the work, but I almost always start with the space that the work is being shown within, as this acts as the backbone for everything else. Initial thoughts and decisions are based on fragments of material tests from the studio and words, images and things I've seen, which consciously or subconsciously evolve and merge with the space at hand. For the larger scale works I have been working with my Dad to create architectural drawings. I enjoy this process in comparison to the physical making of the work, where the process is hectic and unpredictable. The drawings give me scale and rationalise forms in line with the rules of gravity and spatial possibilities – despite my best efforts to rebel against such forces!

A lot of the making process involves working back to front and inside out, almost working blindly to a certain extent when I am pouring materials or casting from invented mould-making methods. At this point the work partly relies on the properties of the materials and the forms they take, as well as my physical involvement. Once poured, the 'shells' of the mould are removed and there is an excavational process in which certain elements are peeled and revealed.

The larger jesmonite works that will be presented at BALTIC are the opposite of this in terms of positive and negative space, carved from large blocks and coated in jesmonite. I have been thinking about this idea of cavities – in relation to the removal of materials (quarries and digging) and the burial on a large scale, and losing teeth and filling and patching holes in our broken bodies on a smaller scale. So it is exciting for me to have this dialogue with making that deals with outlines and insides, negative vacuums and positive forms.

A: What other projects do you have planned this year?

HH: I will be showing new work in a group show at White Rainbow gallery, London in March, titled Lightness and will be showing new works with Limoncello later in the year.

Holly Hendry, Wrot, is at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, until 24 September. Find out more: www.balticmill.com

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Credits:

1. Holly Hendry, Wrot 2017. Installation view at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead. Photo: Mark Pinder/Meta-4