

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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Review: Jonathan Baldock, Facecrime at Bluecoat until 21st June 2020

Remy Greasley

16 April 2020



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There isn't a single word throughout the whole of Jonathan Baldock's Facecrime. Verbal communication wholly retires from the two rooms constituting the exhibition, and Baldock focuses, like a snake having shed the weight of its dead skin, on the non-verbal, the pictorial, and the bodily.

This is Baldock's project, his creative experiment as a multidisciplinary artist focusing on how our bodies interact in their given space. Facecrime centres on the ceramic. Sculptures, masks and monoliths, with no verbal language talk to each other and talk to us.



Room one is a catalogue of masks, all spaghetti and stuccoed, a plethora of textures, each mask a composite of Baldock's appetites on the day of its creation. This leaves them entirely individual, not only visually but in personality also: they each have their own, and as I was in there, I saw people connecting with some more than others. Some people even spent the whole time staring into a single mask, connecting with it (she, him, they) as if it was looking back at them.

This spirituality pervades the whole exhibition. His work is never appropriating or obvious enough to be cheap or predictable, but it retains this spirituality and the whole exhibition taps into some unspoken energy. This is furthered by the layout of the rooms, the second of which Baldock describes as some strange ruin. Visit the show and you'll know what he means; visit unaccompanied and you definitely won't feel alone in its walls.



The monolithic towers of room two are imposing from a distance, though frail, even tentative, from up close. Some are fallen and lie on piles of blue gravel, from which arms and fingers spout. They showcase Baldock's multidisciplinary talent, featuring drooping glass, woven basket, modelled ceramic, stacked and stuck together in colourful totem poles. They speak to each other in irregular whistles and moans which fill up the space like the callings of some bizarre birds.

The journey in unspoken communication continues and develops. The modern world's most universal language, the emoji, spill out of the monoliths like vomit. Erect fingers face visitors in the one-finger salute, glass droops phallically from spouts: symbols as ubiquitous as Mick Jagger. These things pattern the monoliths, giving them a wordless coherency.

The litmus test for Facecrime, I think, in its mission to communicate in these wordless languages, is if visitors will leave with the impression that they somehow communicated back to the masks and monoliths.

It passes this test, as the gallery volunteers would tell you. You can see in the way people stand in front of the sculptures; in the way people are drawn to an individual mask, or an individual part of a fallen monolith; how people

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recognise certain pieces of the exhibition like they have known them before, and how they project something of themselves back onto them.

Facecrime is like a tuning fork for our ability to decipher body language and facial expression. As Baldock says himself, 'humans are so complicated; when we say we feel one way, we can quite often feel another. I like the idea that we can all connect on some level whether we speak the same language or not.' They're an essential part of our lives, our communities, yet no one talks about them.

The exhibition works so well because these languages are innate and so universal, yet it's so fresh because we've forgotten about them, it seems. Baldock invites us into a space of spiritual mistiness, showing us that wordlessness, that quietness, isn't such a lonely, avoidable place; and that there is more to communication than what we say.

Jonathan Baldock's Facecrime is at The Bluecoat until 21st June 2020.

