

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Corridor 8
Jonathan Baldock: Facecrime
Kyle Nathan Brown
30 September 2020

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Jonathan Baldock: Facecrime

The Bluecoat, Liverpool



Image: Jonathan Baldock, Facecrime, Bluecoat Exhibition Launch, 2020. Photo: Brian Roberts

It seems a strange time to visit an art gallery right now, but the latest exhibition at Bluecoat (Liverpool), Jonathan Baldock's Facecrime, was too intriguing to miss. Originally set to open earlier this year, the exhibition was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic and very recently reopened. In a video interview about the exhibition, Baldock explains how the works came about following his research into an alternative history of ceramics; a history in which clay objects were not only functional but were used by early human

civilisations as a means of communication. His interest in Mesopotamian clay tablets, which bear the markings of the ancient pictorial cuneiform language, inspired Baldock to adapt this idea for a contemporary audience, using emoji symbols – the fastest growing non-verbal language of our modern age. Non-verbal language can be found throughout the exhibition, where facial expressions adorn ceramic towers and masks. Solidifying this idea of non-verbal communication is the exhibition's title, 'Facecrime', a reference to George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984, in which body language is used as evidence of guilt, and incentive enough for characters to be arrested and questioned by the state.

In Gallery One, three walls are lined with a row of clay tablets, or 'masks' as Baldock calls them, each unique and bearing a human-like face. There is a sense of walking into a crowded room of private conversations, each stopping dead upon the visitor's entry; some faces appear mouths agape as if interrupted mid-sentence, others with staring eyes demand silence from the rest, which are frozen in comical shock. The room is bright, and the masks are a feverish medley of colour, texture, shape and expression. In some cases, Baldock has used leftover clay, string and beads, giving a sense of urgency, as if these works were conceived during episodes of restless inspiration with the artist hastily grabbing whatever was at hand; others convey a sense of care and patience. The masks range from looking as though they belong in a primary school art class, with their charming naivety and brutish execution, to nightmarish and expertly crafted, and others still feel friendly and wise, as if fallen straight out of folklore and fairy tales.

One mask bears a face of leaves or petals, black with flecks of light brown and glossy with patches of matte paint, arranged around three holes; two eyes and a perfectly spherical, whistling mouth. Contrasting this is a cartoonish pink face, matte and flesh-like, with a crude, trunk-like nose protruding from the middle, bending downwards, then immediately up again before being squashed into where its left eye should be. The solitary right eye resembles a peeling scab, revealing a small orange ball underneath. A second small, this time yellow, ball has been dragged through the wet clay to carve an arched, frowning mouth, and two unnervingly realistic ears jutting out from each side of the tablet complete the piece. The masks are beaming with emotion; warm, friendly, sad, strange and jocular. There's a strangely welcoming energy in Gallery One, after the initial feeling of unease – the artist states that he wants viewers to spend time with the works, and allow their own interpretations to influence how they experience the fascinating characters of the exhibition.

After the intimate atmosphere of the first room, Gallery Two presents something entirely different: a large space strewn with towers of elaborately decorated vases, one of which almost reaches the gallery's high ceiling, whilst others seem to have fallen, spilling blue sand with small stamped coins or disks in heaped piles on the ground, evoking an immediate sense of wonder. Like in Gallery One, there is an abundance of colour, all soft and playful in pastel. This playfulness is apparent throughout these works. Gloss details draw out puckered lips and toothy smiles from the matte finish of the vases, whilst emoji stamps decorate the clay. Protruding tubes and body parts call the viewer with beckoning fingers, waving hands, and mouths ready to

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speak. There's even a distractingly realistic male torso appearing from one vase, which the artist has fashioned after his own. There is a sense of humour in these works, along with a feeling of the artist's hands; art made with skill, thought and care, adding the satisfaction found when comparing something handmade to its mass-produced replicant.

Somewhat obscured by the whimsy of the work is a sophistication in Baldock's use of technique and materials. His use of ceramics, blown glass, wicker basket weaving, and even poured melted wax add depth to the texture and surface of each piece, the latter creating a distinctly fleshy and tactile appearance and maintaining an immersive experience throughout the exhibition.

The space is bright and peaceful, which adds to the surprise when, seemingly out of nowhere, a loud, comical sobbing, or mad cackling is blurted out around the space, bouncing throughout the installation. An almost inhuman whistling occasionally sounds from above; according to the artist, these are the sounds of the works speaking to each other non-verbally, adding an extra dimension to the already visceral world he has created. Baldock has succeeded in giving these characterful objects a sense of history. The strange blue sand that appears to have been spilled around the sculptures may represent what has been lost over the many centuries – but what remains, these ceramic vessels, offer glimpses of bygone civilisations; marketplaces and trading docks, the storing and sharing of goods.

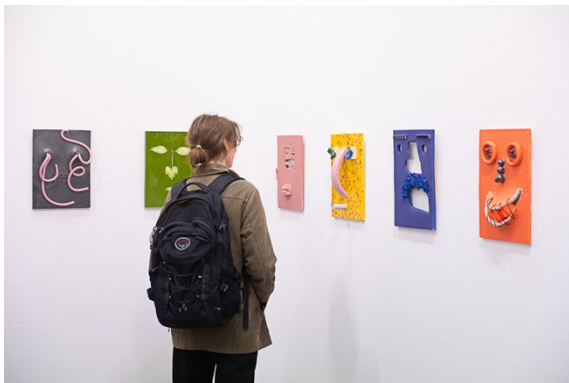


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In the adjoining corridor between the two galleries, the walls are again lined with peering masks, but these feel different to those in Gallery One. Somehow more active, they seek the visitor's attention, like they have something to say. Aesthetically uniform, the artist has utilised a folding technique, with the masks' features only suggested by the lapping of thickly glossed clay. The faces on one side of the corridor appear brutally sad, with their eyes following the visitor around the building, pleadingly. Whereas on the opposite wall the masks are smiling, some of them innocently, and others perhaps not. Though their folds of clay and blank eyes are almost identical to the sad faces, these beings seem to be experiencing something else, perhaps hinting at some absurd truth they learnt from the aeons their kind have seen. This is all conjecture, of course, but it is what this exhibition does so well; awakens the imagination in such a way that the audience can't help but create lives, purposes and histories for these characters and objects.

Facecrime feels as though it is about humanity's enduring talent to communicate through culture: art, language and even facial expressions, highlighting the ability to talk and share, no matter what the circumstances, making this exhibition somewhat comforting in our current time of anxiety and sorrow. The artist wants the viewer to devise their own individual conclusions, but one interpretation is that this exhibition constitutes a place to step back from the current moment and contemplate something enduring.

Jonathan Baldock's Facecrime is on display at Bluecoat until 1 November 2020.

Kyle Nathan Brown is a writer and artist based in Northwest England, currently writing his first novel.

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