

A conversation between Jonathan Baldock Lotte Juul Petersen, Curator, Wysing Arts Centre

I wanted to start by asking you about the television play Quad by Samuel Beckett, which you showed during your residency at Wysing. What attracted you to this play and how has it influenced ideas for your new works and ways of activating your sculptural works in the show?

The artist Emma Hart introduced me to the work during the residency. I had been thinking of ways I could introduce performance and interaction with my sculptural objects for a long time. Much of my practice references the human body in some way, so it really interested me to see how this could affect the work, and in turn how this could affect the audiences' reaction and interpretation. I found Beckett's *Quad* really fascinating because it articulates a space you can't touch or see. It is less of a play and more of a dance with four robbed figures moving around a stage in a coordinated fashion. Whilst thinking about the idea of introducing performance I decided very early on that I didn't want there to be a narrative, or for it to be an illustration of a play, text or song, instead focusing on a series of gestures and actions that were performed with the sculptural objects. In *Quad*, the cloaked figures repeat movements and this has a ritualistic and dark quality that also appealed to me. However, I think that whilst the Beckett piece definitely influenced part of the thinking process behind the performative element of the exhibition, the resulting collaboration with Henrietta Hale will be very different.

It has been really interesting to follow how you have researched and developed an approach that within your work naturally creates an interaction, for example some sculptural elements will function as both objects and bodily accessories. Could you tell more about the process and the actual making of these new sculptural works?

I came to the Wysing residency to explore the metaphorical idea of the forest environment in relation to the future/ a return to nature/ and transformation. This residency was a fantastic opportunity to have conversations and dialogue with the other artists-in-residence and the Wysing curators throughout the development of the work. Much of these discussions were the catalyst for the concept of the exhibition.

All the works in the exhibition are made by hand so that by their very nature they relate to the human body – the touch, shape and weight. In the case of the felt sculptures, each is entirely hand sewn, shaped and cut through a self-taught technique that does not rely on any of the traditional rules used by a tailor or dressmaker. No strict planning or pattern cutting is involved, so the process is very spontaneous and more like a collage in the way I assemble the sculptures. The work evolves slowly through cutting, pinning, and stitching.

It was my intention that everything in the exhibition had the potential to be picked up or held, and could be used within the performance. The ceramic and felt appliqué forms allude to a set function or purpose, but the material with which they are made defies this by its very nature. For example, the fragility and scale of the ceramic hand-tool sculptures means that they are implausible tools.

Since your time here at Wysing you have been to Shanghai and currently you are at the British School of Rome. In which ways when going to a completely different cultural context, has it been possible to test out new ideas for the show A strange cross between a butcher's shop and a nightclub?

Although living in a state of flux over the past 9 months has been at times very stressful, it has also been incredibly important and useful. Since developing the idea to have a performative element to the Wysing

exhibition I was able to test these ideas in collaboration with the German dance duo Rubato Dance Company in Shanghai. I came to them with the idea of making costumes for them to choreograph a performance in response to. My costumes were activated as a kind of sculptural painting through the physicality of dance, in order that they accumulate a history as objects in themselves. The pieces were made specifically for the dancers and were inspired in part by the costumes of traditional Chinese Opera. I wanted the costumes to allow freedom for play, and to function as objects that transform and mutate through dance. This experience was incredibly important to me as it was the first time I had collaborated with others, and so had to relinquish a certain amount of artistic control. Having no prior experience of working in the medium of dance we decided that Jutta Hell would take on the choreography of the performance. I was incredibly pleased with the resulting performance at the Rockbund Art Museum, however I realised that I wanted to have much more involvement in my collaboration with Henrietta Hale. Rather than a polished performance I would like the process and development of the work to hold equal importance – hence the open weekend of the 6/7th July working in the gallery space with Henrietta and keeping it open to an audience.

My time in Rome has been much more reflective and provided an opportunity to process ideas and experiences whilst thinking about how to make them coherent in the exhibition.

I love the title A strange cross between a butcher's shop and a nightclub – it somehow suggest a fictive and implausible space. In your works there are many subtle references to literature, film, and pagan rituals, archaeological materials, the carnivalesque and theatre, could you tell a bit about your inspirational materials.

The title of the show is actually a statement J.G.Ballard used in his 1991 BBC documentary to describe his vision of the dissecting room whilst studying medicine at Kings College, Cambridge. It was such an unlikely visual connection, but seemed so absurdly descriptive. On many levels it seemed an apt title for the exhibition, as I had been reading Ballard during my research at Wysing, and then moved to Shanghai to complete the residency. Shanghai was in fact Ballard's birthplace and the city that informed so much of his work, so he had been a constant presence in the production of the show. In the statement Ballard links two very different locations through referencing the human body. This is something that really resonates in my own practice as I like to draw unlikely parallels and connections together from very different references and one of the main ways in which I do this is through the human form.

Much of the sculpture in the exhibition is inspired by very disparate sources. The larger monolithic sculptures quote the monuments of Stonehenge whilst also looking to the modernist sculpture of Barbara Hepworth. This same sculpture is made through a process of appliqué – stitching together a skin-tight fabric over forms and giving them a very human/bodily presence. The resulting hand-made fabric skin is both a mask and mimicry of the surface of stone, but also a costumed character on an open stage, about to perform.

In my work I try to weave together many different references and make subtle nods to them in the work. I love the idea that the works can be interpreted in different ways and to different levels of intensity. Usually a work starts with a single idea which by the end this is often almost completely abstracted. In this manner I try to avoid any sense of narrative. The pieces must work independently as well as together in an installation. It's important that they have a conversation.

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