

MADE WITH...

CURATOR JOHN STEPHENS IN CONVERSATION WITH ARTISTS
MAXINE BRISTOW & ANNA FAIRCHILD ABOUT THEIR PRACTICES

During lockdown 2020, curator John Stephens spoke to the artists about their work, creative process and the Made With... exhibition.

John Stephens: As the curator, I thought of your inclusion in the show based on what I knew about your interests in material(s) and the unique ways in which you use them. Can you say something about your materials and why you use them or what you have in mind when you're working with them?

Maxine Bristow: The materials I choose to work with are generally those that are entangled in day-to-day reality and embedded in the spatial practices, corporeal habits, and repeated routines of our everyday experience. They are materials that constitute the fabric of interior environments and silently form the backdrop to our mundane actions and are manufactured into the functioning objects through which we invisibly mediate our relationship with the world.

I am partially interested in the often-overlooked somatic relationships with the built environment and the haptic dimensions of everyday embodied experience, even in the most commonplace institutional settings. My attitude towards these materials draws reference from material culture studies where there is a simultaneous concern with what materials are in a physical sense and what they do in the social world.

My point of departure is often primarily an aesthetic response dictated by the play of formal concerns – hard against soft, rigid against pliant, smooth against striated... However, I am also interested in the signifying potential of materials, particularly the social, cultural and craft/design histories and affective resonances that they convey.

Anna Fairchild: I work mainly with plaster in a way which seeks to use the fluid and eventually fixed nature of the material itself to allow forms to emerge in a part controlled and part intuitive way, through the pouring, splattering, and dribbling of the liquid plaster onto flat surfaces. I begin with some kinds of inspirational starting points but intend that by using the properties and qualities inherent in the material, shapes and forms emerge, which resemble things seen or experienced and yet are different from them.

JS: Can you say something about the relationship between the materials (and processes) you use and what they ultimately configure?

MB: I employ a range of handmade processes as well as some elements of industrial fabrication, drawing upon craft and artisanal skills as well as design and mass material production. Examples of studio methods include upholstery, timber construction, steamed bent wood, Formica lamination, pipe bending, hand embroidery and plain sewing and soft furnishing techniques. These are used to create a series of 'thingly' sculptural components that are variously configured and reconfigured in a series of staged installational scenarios.

I had in mind the idea that one could reconfigure these quasi functional objects, as one would rearrange furnishings, fittings, and fixtures in a domestic environment. Just as one might select items from an IKEA catalogue, the individual sculptural elements would offer both in the imagination and in practice, the potential for an infinite variety of possible permutations. This reference to interior design and the aesthetic staging of the everyday through visual merchandising and retail display, gave rise to the idea of documenting the elements in the form of what became a four-meter concertina style 'catalogue'. The production of the individual elements is largely motivated by formal concerns and seeks to return authority to the aesthetic impulse, privileging the ambiguity of an abstract sculptural language over strategies of representation. However, at the same time, through the resonances of its materials and processes, the work refers to objects that are vaguely familiar.

My aim is to attest to the agential capacity of materials and the productive indeterminacy of the sensuously bound experiential

encounter – to materially seduce and mobilise multiple, complex, and contradictory connotations which in resisting easy resolution always have the potential to exceed conceptual synthesis. This desire to produce an ambiguity of feeling that simultaneously reaffirms and destabilizes subjectivity is heightened by the coolly detached all-pervading greyness of its palette and the highly staged aesthetic artifice of the work, which sets the work apart from its everyday mass material counterparts.

AF: It is important for me that the process of direct casting (that is taking a direct indexical trace directly off a surface, without the use of a mould) allows the shapes and forms to be different each time, which intentionally subverts some traditional ideas about the use of plaster in a way to cast repetitions of things in series from known or recognisable forms. I intend for the process I use together with the acknowledgement of the inherent properties of the material, to allow new forms and, I maintain, tacit knowledge to emerge.

JS: I've suggested in my introduction to the exhibition catalogue that your approach to working with materials might be seen as having a constructive approach whereby the work could be seen to be assembled in a predetermined way (Maxine) or as having an entropic approach (Anna) exemplified by a more intuitive approach to the making of your work.

Do you feel this is a true reflection of your attitude to making work? If so, can you expand on this?

MB: My earlier work, which harnessed the processes, materials and accompanying contexts of needlework/plain-sewing within the conventions of a minimalist aesthetic, was very labour intensive and involved meticulously planned and predetermined execution. The conception of the more recent work as a series of interchangeable elements, which can be continually assembled and reassembled, marks a significant shift in approach.

There is still the opportunity for a level of precision and control in the making of the individual elements; but at the same time, a greater degree of spontaneity as the initial production of the work moves from the security of the studio to a process of performed improvisation

within the space of display. Offering the opportunity for continual rearrangement, the physical form of the work remains essentially mutable, materialized through the temporary coalition of the discrete sculptural components within a changing series of staged mise-en-scène. Meaning similarly remains mutable mobilized through the various correspondences set play across the different elements and the subject of the experiential encounter.

There is still a very evident 'constructive' approach, but the process of assemblage allows new relationships to momentarily coalesce and for the work to dictate its own direction beyond predetermined subjective production values of design and manufacturing processes, is how to assimilate with but at the same differentiate form mainstream consumable objects. From my own perspective, it is the self-conscious highly staged artifice of the work that allows the work to maintain a level of aesthetic autonomy and declare itself first and foremost as an aesthetic object.

AF: Yes, I think this is an insightful observation of the way I use materials and process. I am interested in the way in which these can access tacit knowledge (in forms as yet unknown) from direct observations and experiences together with things recalled or imagined. As I allow the forms to suggest several things and yet become something new in themselves, I like to imagine that these resemblances and differences tend to cling precariously together (physically in the appearance of the objects and in our recollections).

It is important that any traces on the underside surface of the solidified plaster are lifted off the casting surface during the process of making in layers and combinations which I try to imagine and yet can never quite know. I have previously described this kind of synchronic tearing through the material, which I intend to oppose the idea of time experienced as a linear event; more coalesced in the surface and form of an object itself, rather like rings of a tree or a slice through a flint stone.

JS: You have arrived at this point in your artistic career having had experiences of things outside your current (artistic) practice, as a designer, academic etc. can you say something about the impact of those past experiences on your current practice?

MB: Although I have always taught fine art, there is generally a textile element to my practice by way of acknowledging my educational background in textiles and the historical dissemination of the work largely under the banner of contemporary craft or textile specific contexts.

As an artist whose identity has been formulated in relation to my historical allegiance to textile materials and processes, the challenge raised in practice is how to recognise the significance of situated experience and the continuing validity of a practice grounded in a critical interrogation of material conventions. At the same time there is a desire to avoid re-rehearsing well-worn aesthetic strategies and predetermined discursive contexts and instead actively embrace the richness and diversity afforded by the post-modern/post-medium condition of contemporary art.

My earlier work strategically framed traditional needlework and plain-sewing techniques within the conventions of a minimalist aesthetic and in relation to the discourse of modernist autonomy. Informed by my engagement with feminist and poststructuralist theory, what was initially a productive and empowering strategy, in time became formulaic and creatively limiting. I found myself backed into a corner as the work became subsumed by its own agenda and dictated by a strategy of negative opposition and the subversion of the cultural ideas that were set in play. The new work was an attempt to take a more critically affirmative approach, acknowledge my complicity with the very systems that I sought to oppose and actively open up to heterogeneity and alterity.

AF: Well, it is interesting to have studied Fine Art up to master's level and they embarked and completed a Professional Doctorate in Fine Art in that over the last five years, I have felt able to allow methodology of material combined with process to be the research. I find it fascinating that I can align the forms in physical and cultural geography, which are recognised to reveal knowledge with the way that I, myself as an artist can think through the materials themselves and that this also has a kind of equivalence in terms of research and new knowledge.

