

Quick draw, slow build

The human race is obsessed with distinguishing itself from our fellow animals, vegetables and minerals, and this compulsion has resulted in the destruction of countless delicate ecosystems. On a micro level, the same scene is being played out in our own individual ecosystems too – a disconnect between mind and matter, where nature and instinct are shamed away through learned behaviours, with damaging results.

But where there is life, there is hope. In building up these pot stacks, Cybele Cox is building up a new belief system from remnants of old ones, discarding the broken and bad parts and elevating those which were previously underestimated or hidden. 'Civilisation' celebrates what Cox characterises as the 'head on a stick', and her practice inverts this hierarchy of the cerebral over the corporeal by reprioritising the essential, the nourishing and the pleasurable.

These vertical arrangements speak across millennia of visual history and culture, from prehistoric totems to classical columns, from modernist forms to contemporary statuary; from Bosch to Brueghel to Brancusi to Bourgeois to Beyoncé. Roundels of pendulous breasts, eyes, limbs, feet and other vital, fleshy things are stacked between symbols of memento mori, art historical motifs, and the geometries of the vast pottery canon.

There is humour in upending history, in placing the corpulent and unwieldy atop a pedestal, and Cox's sculptures are a fine balancing act between gravity and levity. An ejaculating tower of breasts might cause viewers to giggle in the gallery, and that eruption-disruption is an offer to pause at the moment of awkward encounter and consider what is taboo, and why. What does it mean to laugh at, or shy away from, representations of one's own body and its functions? What power structures are served by the perpetuation of this discomfort or fear?

These stacks bring to mind an exquisite corpse, the drawing exercise where a peculiar figure is composed piece by piece, each section a surprising addition to the last. In fact, the origin of these sculptures is indeed drawing, with Cox sketching these figures as quickly and spontaneously as she dreams them up, filling notebooks with illustrated imaginings of future sculptures which then take months to painstakingly build from clay: quick draw, slow build.

Unlike the sketches they are born from, these sculptural compositions are not bound by their frame. They coax the viewer in, and around, and around, while reaching ever skyward. Just as in the costumed and choreographed performances which form an important component of Cox's practice, the artist's sculptures represent an intersection of bodily protagonists and a slippage of roles: artist, creator, performer, viewer.

Like the many pendulous breasts which encircle Cox's pot stacks, the weight of history hangs heavy. As encapsulated in the activist's classic sign that reads, I can't believe I still have to protest this shit, our contemporary concerns are as old as time, but in the era of the 24-hour news cycle, when everything served up fresh instantly turns stale, it's easy to forget that we have walked this path before. Cox has given herself free reign to fossick in the trunk of

historical imagery, inviting the viewer to imagine a new version of events. These are not inanimate conglomerations, but mysterious propositional beings, or becomings. They invite the viewer to be courageous, to unstick and unstack ourselves piece by piece, and then rebuild ourselves bit by bit, in a new order.

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