

Playing with precarity, conjuring up common ground

A review by artist/bricoleuse **Gillian Whiteley** of the [Material Voice](#) exhibition, [Matter Out of Place](#) [Yorkshire Artspace](#), Sheffield
17 June to 10 July 2021

Times out of joint, matter out of place

There is something enchanting about entering the cavernous exhibition space populated with the tangle of materials and wondrous array of objects that is Material Voice's [Matter Out of Place](#). Like a small animal asleep, a skein of dark hair, bound with nylon mesh, lies limp on the windowsill. Is it breathing, is it alive? Through the vast shopfront window of the Yorkshire Artspace, passers-by peer in at an assemblage of objects created by Burton Street artists arranged on a tall table. Resembling a crazy magician's set of props, wooden blocks are decorated with bright splashes of paint and day-glo pipe-cleaners, a green ball balances precariously on a luminous orange plastic yarn cone. An assortment of linked objects perch high up on a ledge: small wooden shapes tied up with string are attached to a jagged twig with a bright orange ball that surveys the space like a living watchful antennae. A little further along, a surreal object catches the eye: the cardboard box, one of Clee Claire Lee's Utters, 'Utter II', appears to be sprouting wiry pubic hair. Perhaps this is yet another sign of life, stuttering, heckling, sniggering.

Coming at the end of a prolonged period of unprecedented precarity in terms of public health, with the imposition of social distancing, restrictions on physical interaction and the suppression of social life, *Matter Out of Place* is full of surprises and comes as a splash of light in dark times. Joyful and with a wry sense of humour, aptly titled pieces, such as Mandy Gamsu and Kate Langrish-Smith's 'Touchy Buns', play with an array of unexpected combinations of materials and objects. Some objects are finely balanced and teeter precariously. Others, such as a silverplate ladle rigidly embedded in a clump of concrete perched on the edge of an old wooden chair, part of Gillian Brent's 'A Seat at the Table', demonstrate the strength of things joining together. *Matter Out of Place* encapsulates these 'times out of joint' perfectly, laughing back in impudent defiance, the work on show plays up to notions of disruption and celebrates a kind of misfit materiality.

The pieces selected for display emerged from a project that has engaged six members of the collective of Sheffield based women artists, Material Voice – Gillian Brent, Mandy Gamsu, Kate Langrish-Smith, Clee Claire Lee, Laura Page and Sarah Villeneuve – throughout many months of the pandemic, instigated by a project started in May 2020. Initially working with cardboard boxes as a raw material, they established a series of conversations and materials exchanges with two community special needs art groups, Artworks South Yorkshire and Burton Street Arts, both based in Sheffield. Mandy ran some Zoom workshops with Artworks while Gillian visited Burton Street Arts, taking a collection of materials for them to do what they chose with. The artwork produced by the two groups inspired new directions and a whole set of fresh creative responses from the Material Voice artists. Other sculptural propositions and provocations were set for each other by the Material Voice artists. For example, Mandy Gamsu invited others to consider and respond to Eva Hesse's 1966 'Hang Up', a piece which Hesse, known for her use of unconventional materials, once described as

‘the most ridiculous structure that I ever made’. Resonating with Hesse’s approach, the body of work produced by Material Voice features idiosyncratic combinations of materials that also speak to anthropologist Mary Douglas’s much-cited phrase ‘matter out of place’, taken from her 1966 book *Purity and Danger*. However, this exhibition is also the result of multiple layers of collaboration. This process continues in the exhibition space, as the objects themselves also become actants, activating the viewer to make new responses and connections.

Common stuff, ‘a bit of a bonfire aesthetic’

Cheap, versatile and ubiquitous, cardboard is a key feature in many of the exhibits and, indeed, is foundational to the project. Paradoxically, in the topsy-turvy time of the pandemic, due to cardboard ‘being stored in people’s garages’ (BBC News, 23 June 2021) leading to shortages over the last year, this common stuff has apparently become a rarity. Nevertheless, with a sustainability ethos in mind, the *Matter Out of Place* project was initiated with the procurement of a batch of used cardboard boxes from the Sheffield-based workers’ co-operative wholefood greengrocery store, Beanies. Over thirty large boxes were distributed to the two community art groups. Following a period of experimentation over a month, with great resourcefulness and invention, the boxes were variously painted, adorned, deconstructed and reconstructed. One box on display had been cut into small mosaic-like pieces, re-assembled and wall-mounted. A central feature of the exhibition is a row of large unfolded boxes splayed open alongside each other on a curved wall. A wide range of creative approaches have been adopted by the Artworks artists including the use of bold abstract marks, patterns and textures: one flattened box is daubed with a graffiti-style slogan, declaring ‘I LOVE ARTWORKS’; another forms a mini-robot with pointy ears, two-tone face and legs, three buttons on its blue jacket and green arms.

Responding to and inspired by the art groups’ cardboard constructions, the Material Voice artists also worked with cardboard boxes as starting points for their own collaborative works. These boxes developed through processes of deconstruction, destruction and addition, accruing leather, wood, plastic, rubber and various found objects as they were passed from one person to another. In some of the final collaborative works, the cardboard box has been reworked so much that it is hardly discernible. Reminiscent of Jean Tinguely’s kinetic machinic assemblages, ‘Box 3’ started off as a humble cardboard box and, as various artists contributed to its development, it metamorphosed into a painted conglomeration of wire and bamboo, finally acquiring bicycle wheels wrapped with cellophane. Remarkably, the piece comes together as though it has been purposefully designed. This aspect is echoed in an astute comment by Gillian Brent on one of the collaborative reconstituted pieces, as she noted that despite having ‘a bit of a bonfire aesthetic’, they had created ‘a dynamic coherent sculpture’ (Brent’s Instagram post, February 2021).

Across the rest of the exhibits, the ‘bonfire aesthetic’ continues, sometimes demonstrating meticulously combined materials such as the combination of black plastic foot stool and lamp cables in Clee’s ‘Utter IV’. At other times there is an acute sensitivity to the tactility and fragility of stuff, as in Sarah Villeneuve’s ‘Innasense’, a clay ‘tower’ adorned with moulded body parts. Concealed inside is an exquisite series of tiny objects suspended with raffia and wire, including a twist of human hair and a found object, a scrap of clay embedded with seashore débris. Everywhere, materials mix and meld together in unpredictable ways – wood, metal, wire, clay, plastic – highlighted especially in Laura Page’s

video 'Inertia versus Transfiguration' that hones in on the intricate details of some of the artworks. As metal meets leather and clay meets cardboard, *Matter Out of Place* evokes a kind of joyful version of Arte Povera. The serendipitous meetings of objects also remind me of Richard Wentworth's longstanding 'pairings' photo-series, *Making Do and Getting By*, in the way that found encounters make us look afresh at our material environment.

For me, in particular, 'Box 2' encompasses the kind of 'call and response' strategy and the unanticipated combining of materials and objects that has resulted in truly collaborative practices. Like a ritualistic object, in this totemic assemblage, a series of galvanised mesh cages are stacked precariously. Inside each one there are intriguing objects: tiny bundles of fabric wrapped with leather straps, a tiny 'forest' of twigs, topped off with a makeshift curiosity cabinet item, sprigs of dried French sage encased in a plastic dome. The final touch inside the bottom cage, is Kate Langrish-Smith's 'Glow', a ceramic square with yellow tassels mounted on a garish pink wooden block. Like some kind of votive offering, it signifies the affective experience of the whole show, a warming feast for the eye and the heart.

Materialising common ground

A final note. In a time when physical proximity and human touch has been impossible, this project has generated real connections. Across virtual as well as physical spaces and sites, art has become a meeting place, not just for materials and objects but for three groups of artists with very different backgrounds and experiences. Bringing this together through generosity and hospitality in a common space, a site of welcome has been conjured up out of nothing. Material Voice have materialised common ground, as a place of joy not just for the sharing of things, but joy in working with each other.

Gillian Whiteley

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