

Gleaners

Olivia Bax Hannah Hughes

During the parenthesis of lockdown a reflexion blossomed in conversation between artists Olivia Bax and Hannah Hughes about their experience of making work at a time when their circumstances and sphere of action had become considerably restricted by the Covid epidemic. They discussed in particular the uses of discarded materials in their work – cardboard and unwanted paint in Bax’s sculptures; ‘negative spaces’ cut out of photographs and empty packaging in the case of Hughes’s photographic collages and sculptural forms respectively. Significantly, Agnès Varda’s experimental documentary film *The Gleaners and I* (2000), which explores various aspects of gleaning in contemporary France, from the collecting of left-over produce from fields after the harvest to the salvaging of food and discarded goods from urban markets and dumpsters, was also part of their conversation.

OB→HH: *‘I often draw an analogy between cooking with only a few ingredients and making sculpture. The comparison felt particularly profound during lockdown. At home, we made meals with historic cans from the cupboard. In the studio, I had an urgency to finish the last bits of paint and other materials in order to use things up.’*

HH→OB: *‘During lockdown, making things out of whatever we found around the house became an important part of life, particularly in the beginning, when supplies became very scarce and ordinary things became incredibly precious. I realised then how wasteful I have become. I have been really interested in looking at the links to my practice, which has been centred for a long time around seeking value in found and discarded materials, and of using the parts of images and objects that might ordinarily be overlooked or thrown away.’*

Beyond Bax and Hughes’s specific approaches, their shared interest in Agnès Varda’s film offers a useful crucible for the work of both artists, and perhaps for their sensibility. *Glaneuse* (a female gleaner) rhymes with the more familiar French word *flâneuse* (a female *flâneur*). An urban figure associated with Paris, the idle *flâneuse* meanders through the streets at her leisure, an amused observer. In contrast, Bax and Hughes appear through their practices much more akin to *glaneuses* in the spirit of Varda. The *glaneuse* isn’t idle; she has purpose and drive. In the *glaneuse*, the curiosity she has in common with the *flâneuse* becomes a more frontal, practical-minded engagement with her surroundings. The *glaneuse* is a seeker, a hunter-gatherer, and also a maker who puts what she harvests to good use. Varda’s film is for the main part a compassionate dialogue with those gleaners that are moved inexorably by hunger and penury, but she does also weave into her narrative – and its denunciation of waste – other people whose motivations are more unexpected: children, artists and activists who like to make and remake things from rubbish. Moreover, Varda explicitly makes herself a part of her film and, while recording her circuitous journey through France, gleaning what people say and feel through images and interviews, reflects at the same time on the process of ageing she notices in her own body. The film contains a moving juxtaposition of shrivelled heart-shaped potatoes (discarded for being the ‘wrong’ shape) and the director’s own hands – an old woman’s hands – and those rejected potatoes also inspired Varda’s first visual art installation at the Venice Biennale.

Hannah Hughes has amassed an archive of hundreds of mass-produced images out of which she cuts out the shapes of ‘negative spaces’, such as, for example, the textile background framing an object featured in an auction catalogue. Drawn to their sculptural quality, she has also been collecting discarded industrially moulded pulp-paper packaging – ghostly vessels. Olivia Bax collects discarded newspaper and cardboard in her rucksack ‘on her travels’ to and from her studio and salvages unwanted paint from hardware stores. For both artists these gleanings are the essential grist to their mill: they provide the materials needed to make art. For Bax, making her own paper pulp means that she can generate a lot of material cheaply. ‘If I mix too much material,’ she says, ‘I use it elsewhere. If a sculpture isn’t working, I cut it up to reuse. I don’t like waste.’ ‘I also like returning to images and objects I have used before,’ says Hughes, ‘to see if there is something worth salvaging from the scraps that I hadn’t noticed first time around.’ Thus both artists’ practices offer highly personal responses to Varda’s own definition of her project as a film-maker: to consider society’s ‘trash and waste – who finds a use for it? How? Can one live on the leftovers of others?’

OB→HH: *‘During lockdown I started collecting polystyrene and cardboard packaging on my daily walk. I suppose people were buying electronics at a frantic rate to set up home offices? I started making smaller work gathering what I could find and using up what I had.’*

Olivia Bax’s work is nourished and underpinned by urban exploration. During a residency in Hong Kong, she observed makeshift bamboo balconies attached to buildings, as well as the architectural engineering of public urban facilities such as outdoor gyms, gleaning ideas about structure and space or, in the words of Agnès Varda describing her own process, ‘picking up threads that eventually begin to knot together.’ Bax’s sculptures begin with more threads, this time in the form of lines in a drawing. These ‘doodles’, once their threads become knotted into a suitable shape, form ‘a skeleton’. Then comes the armature stage, treated by the artist as ‘a three-dimensional drawing’. Once upon a time Bax used steel to draw form in space, but she came to feel it was important to her to measure up to her works physically and to be able to handle, lift and, if necessary, dismantle them easily. Her armatures are now made of polystyrene. Once the form stands there begins the stage of coating it in chicken wire, papier mâché and then paper pulp, as though creating solid areas and clarifying the drawing, going over it in order to understand it. Nothing is simple in this process of capture. Waiting for any part to dry can take up to two weeks. Bax’s short story ‘The Foot Cage’ draws an analogy between her cousin’s broken bone having to be realigned through wearing external apparatus and the way she herself uses armature to find the right forms. ‘What if the armature is on the outside?’ she asks. ‘Can we make sculpture the “wrong” way round?’

The tension at play here lies in acknowledging the presence of the human, in announcing it. Whereas the architectural design of public spaces such as gyms, railways stations or fast food restaurants is conceived for a theoretical average person, in order to funnel people through as efficiently as possible, sculpture ‘is good at getting in the way’. It encourages you to stop and look, and, crucially, is ‘not averaged’. Bax’s work, though it sometimes references street furniture and other public spaces, is asymmetrical, wonky, bulbous. Those precarious Hong Kong balconies added on to buildings are connected for Bax with our reliance on the pockets stitched on to our clothes, on the vessels we use to hold our belongings at home. They inspire in her sculptures a play with the relationship between public and private, inside and out, forming organic cavities that are also frames, making structures whose underneaths and insides are often on show, inviting the viewer to walk around exploringly and peer in and through the work’s windows and crevices – dreaming perhaps of nesting inside it. Deliberately questioning and confrontational, the shapes are problematic. There are sculptures within sculptures *chez* Bax, and mysterious embedded narratives. A work such as *Juicer* suggests at once a sewing table, a desk, a piece of industrial machinery and, connected to it, an umbrella stand or golf bag. The shapes are also evocative of internal organs. What are we juicing here? Why? Other works such as *Suck* and *Sift*, with their playful titles, present the same organic/mechanistic duality, suggestive of automatic processes and/or digestion. Many of Bax’s works gesture towards the action of funnelling, but in an entirely different way from, say, those carefully streamlined transitory public spaces designed to hurry us through. Not for nothing is her family from rural Scotland, where whisky is distilled locally, and where, in lockdown, her father made sloe gin so as not to waste the fruit. Bax’s sculptures too are products of distillation, of a slow transmutation of materials. And then, when they are finished and positioned in the exhibition space, they become, Bax says, ‘activated’ by our gaze, by our movement around them, while conversely retaining a sense of secrecy, of something invisibly at work within them.

Bax’s expressive use of colour is a major aspect of her work’s confrontational presence. Her blues, purples, yellows, greens, oranges and pinks are punchy. They are also scavenged colours, gleaned from the back of hardware stores, where household paint colours that have been mixed wrongly are banished. Bax likes the idea that these, because they are ‘wrong’, are ‘not actually a colour’. During lockdown, the idea of the virus going around inspired her to intensify their tones by mixing more pulp with more colour in it. The colour has to fit the form; sometimes, Bax says, ‘something has to be red.’ The working out of the correct colour and the finding of the right form are one and the same act of distillation. The shapes are moulded by hand, and visibly so. Tactile impressions from the maker’s hand stay on the surfaces, telling the story of how Bax pressed the stuff to make it stick. Rather than either abstract or figurative, the works are human, gesturing always towards the body.

HH→OB: *‘Packing forms an outer membrane, an outside skin, wrapping, shielding, cocooning, cradling, suspending fragile objects, protecting them from being bruised or broken. The pulp is like a sediment or layers of strata storing the memory of absent objects, something to be sifted to discover concealed histories.’*

It is no accident that discarded pulp packaging *objets trouvés* should have caught the eye of Hannah Hughes, an artist with a profound preoccupation with the mysteries of presence, dimensionality and in-between spaces. At the root of her practice is an interest in the relationship between Modernist sculpture and photography, namely photographs of Constantin

Brâncuși’s sculptures taken in his studio. These, showing how he choreographed space around his works, shifted Hughes’s focus on to the zones around the objects on display. Hughes’s gleanings, the components of her images, come from magazines and catalogues, and her photographic collages are made from the spaces that were originally behind, around or between objects and figures. These Hughes cuts out and re-photographs in order to make them into new works. In a revolutionary move, the throwaway bits, the overlooked corners and edges, the unimportant sections of a photograph are inverted to become the positive volume in the image created by Hughes. This involves a lengthy process of configuration and assembly, trying out different compositions until the resulting visual forms develop what she calls ‘their own sense of presence and internal logic’ and even ‘a character or attitude’. One aspect of this is the ghostly presence of the human body, perhaps perceived subliminally when looking at the image. A lot of these images’ original forms came from shapes around figures, and some will retain what Hughes calls ‘a borderly connection to the figure’. The artist is also interested in the way that shapes make the viewer feel, especially when the scale of the image isn’t clear, and when one is having to think about oneself in relation to it. The title of a collage such as *Zip Down* gives a clue to its ‘attitude’ in this respect: as she was shaping the work Hughes was thinking ‘about all these exercise videos during lockdown talking about the way you feel in your body, and I was quite amused by the idea of “zipping up your thighs” or “zipping up your core” and so with this one it felt like everything was pulling upwards.’

Thinking about our attitudes to the body soon shades into the uncanny. But aren’t all shapes, whether abstract or figurative – or, as is the case of Hughes’s enigmatic compositions, neither/both – potentially vehicles for uncanniness? A seminal intertext for Hughes is *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin A. Abbott, a satirical Victorian novella that straddles the genres of science fiction and socio-political allegory. It describes a rigidly hierarchical two-dimensional world occupied by geometric figures. The narrator is a square who is introduced by a visiting sphere to the idea of a three-dimensional world beyond his own, and also comes to contemplate the possibility of a fourth dimension. Hughes’s collages are profoundly informed by a questioning of how we perceive the idea of dimensionality and, possibly, a fourth dimension, something, Hughes says, ‘that we can’t see but that we can somehow visualise.’ The purpose of her compositions is to create shifting, ambiguous images containing a slippage between one thing and another, where we begin to see something that isn’t there.

Hughes’s works incorporate modelling and shadows derived from the lighting in the original photographs, which endows each piece from a separate photograph with the appearance of volumetric form, like a sculpture. Talking about *Contredanse*, an image made in lockdown, Hughes explains that she had been thinking about the idea of groups of dancers moving while facing one another, about movement within the work in which the shapes could be seen to work together pushing and pulling, of the way that volumes can appear to retract and shift as the elements work together, as in a dance – or, it seems to me, a sort of pulsation. All her compositions are dynamic reconfigurations of this kind. Tensions are created by shifting between the flat and the sculptural, the found and the constructed. Hughes has been working on trying to ‘animate’ her collages by using computer software made to work in two dimensions and then being forced into a 3-D realm and seeing what happens when the computer tries to read the 2-D images in three dimensions. The resulting other-worldly images, which in spite of their apparent unity are actually made up of fragments lifted from different places and times, retain, she says, ‘a sort of activeness,’ something ‘that is not fully resolved’. They are portals and triggers to an alternative way of seeing what is around you.

Hughes’s *Outer Movement* series, silver-gelatin prints of found packing materials arranged in stacks, represents another turn of the screw. Here are, for the first time, photographs of real objects instead of collaged forms. Transformed by assemblage and photography, the paper pulp looks mineral, authoritative. Hughes has also cast some of the forms in porcelain, saying: ‘Moulding and casting is another way in which the idea of positive and negative comes into the work. [...] These new porcelains also invert the material value of the original pulp skins, replacing something tough and throw-away with something delicate and fragile. In a way, this removes whatever remained of their functionality.’

Never let anything go to waste. Remain open to accidents and chance encounters. Surprise is often the best possible outcome. Being a gleaner means harvesting rejects and turning them into something new and unexpected – a visual exploration of being human.

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