

Issue 03 – Josephine Baker

SOS / Sculptors on Sculpture is a series of weekly condensed interviews with young contemporary sculptors.

London-based artist Josephine Baker works through assemblage, installation, drawing, and poetry. Using readily-available standardised materials, she composes physical metaphors for how the natural earth is represented in a capitalocentric world.

SOS: This has been a reoccurring question throughout this series of interviews so far and it seems important to acknowledge. How have you adapted to the Covid-19 lockdown? Are you able to make work at this time?

JB: I'm writing this on the 19th April, approaching week five of the lockdown in the UK. I never thought I'd be willing to make this distinction, but I'm adapting as a person first, and an artist second. But I'm sure that'll blur back together in the coming weeks and months. I'm in no rush to start loads of new projects. Making work has always been for me a process which slows the world down, adds more detailed punctuation between things and experiences, and in these times of exponential acceleration and change this slowness seems ever more present and vital. Like the way right now isolation is inevitably coupled with a kind of chaos.

I feel aware of the fact that my work in the past few years has been engaged with ideas around catastrophism. But now, with what we're all living through, I don't feel like that needs to be simply reiterated or reaffirmed, but rather redefined and rechallenged. And that will take time.



'Islands' (detail), 2019, preformed pond, cement, tiles, anticlimb spikes plywood, pine, pigments

I'm often thinking about how symbolism and metaphor function to enforce or question ideologies and collective thought-processes, and how they affect the earth we live on. But I also never thought I'd be looking at shapes on digital charts symbolising aggressiveness and inequality quite in this way, and never thought I'd experience togetherness and separation quite like this either. In short, I'm sure my practice has already changed, it just hasn't yet shown me the details.

SOS: For your exhibition 'Islands' at the end of last year at Kupfer Project Space you made these towering fractured islands made from repurposed gardening and construction materials, which referenced offshore oil platforms. Your sculptures are rich in material associations and contradictions. Can you talk me through your process and how you choose your materials?

JB: I've described the studio before as a kind of microclimate, one which materials and processes constantly force their way in and out of. Experiments with growth, breakdown, and cyclicity take place within this space where everything is contingent on everything else. I often manipulate household and building materials into addressing the linear process of their standardisation and their consumption, the separation of effects and causes, before and after. Excess of a certain material will be related to scarcity; industrially-processed materials will be related to their raw natural state. I choose materials that I think bring histories and ingrained futures with them, but sometimes I only see their particularities long after I've started gathering them, and sometimes only when I end up with what becomes a 'finished' work.

The freestanding sculptures that made up 'Islands' related to one another to form an archipelago. The way they stood in the space formed the floor into the surface of the sea. Turning the preformed ponds into structures resembling offshore oil platforms made sense to me, these black plastic vacuum formed shapes mimicking the value of the randomness of nature, and how it is capitalised on. In naming them 'islands', I was trying to trap that lack of clarity in the clearest way possible: an island can be geologically natural, manmade, or a combination of the two. The real separations that value creates are what metaphors, in the way they jump, can perform, trace, and reveal.

SOS: In a recent interview you gave with Boundary you spoke of trying to absorb processes that acknowledge your vulnerability, which is a remark that really struck me. Can you expand on this?

JB: I guess there are a few ways I can describe it. In a literal sense, the process of making work is not that secure, as in, making big works out of heavy materials is physically challenging. And I



Installation view of 'Islands', 2019, Kupfer Project Space, London.

don't exactly aspire to feel safe in the process of their production. I'm thinking on a smaller scale about Serra, Heizer, the land artists... I've gone through phases of worshipping and resenting many of them. Reclaiming this kind of vulnerability in making from that almost exclusively male, territorial sublime is important to me somehow.

But what I mean is primarily about describing circumstance. The processes I use form allegories of 'human natures',

and the environments that affect and are affected by forms of human governance, and patterns of exploitation. In this sense, vulnerability is something that needs to be carefully understood, acknowledged and critiqued in some way. And through these focuses, the work necessarily becomes vulnerable too. For example, a rupture takes place when the things I make get removed from the studio habitat, to be reassembled elsewhere. The objects' contexts are really fragile. It's crucial that it's not always a given that they will survive. I strive for accuracy to lived, felt experience, but a kind of accuracy that is somehow unrecognisable to that reality, that nonetheless follows it around, always hiding in plain sight.

SOS: When you are working, where does your inclination to be making work come from? Is it a restlessness, a curiosity, an inquisitiveness? Are you the type of artist who needs to be working all the time?

JB: It is definitely a kind of labour. One that, in the best of times, encourages the closest



'Desert Shore (2)', 2019, Chalk on tiles, plywood, pigmented mortar, barbed wire, corrugated metal, scaffolding, mdf, painted pine, tile dust, pink masking tape, 272 x 196 x 94cm

feelings I've had to what could be called a kind of happiness, or elation. And in the worst of times it is trapped in that very comparison to labour, and all the consequences of 9-to-5 creativity, productivity anxiety, the work ethic, etc.

I'm generally quite a restless person, so constantly working on something or other is maybe much like scratching itches. I'm not necessarily unhappy with that. It's easy to over-intellectualise 'the Drive'. But this also creates other problems, like finding it hard to let certain things go that aren't working, and sometimes not allowing myself enough time to sit back and just think, or dream. But when things are gaining momentum, I feel like a participant in some kind of complex



'Night music' (detail), 2018, British School at Rome. Chalk on terracotta tiles, glazed ceramic tiles, painted plywood, pine, painted branches and leaves



thinking / acting dialectic, which strives to be as much like life itself as possible. So maybe that's more of a reason why I let it all constantly bubble alongside me, and find it hard to take a holiday from it.

SOS: Are there any sculptors practicing today who you feel you share a particular affinity with?

JB: This is probably not the best thing to admit in an interview series focused on sculptors, but I'm not particularly interested in contemporary sculpture. I think it's quite hard to persuade someone, a viewer, that matter isn't inert. That it isn't lifeless. It's this territory that I'm interested in: how life comes about, in whatever form and place. I don't think it's the reserve of sculptors to heat up what we in our everyday



'Waterfall' (detail), 2020



'Waterfall', 2020, bitumen roofing, tiles, chalk, approx. 120 x 100 x 5 cm

lives overlook or assume to be cold or lifeless. I find these moments of lucidity in literature and poetry, a kind of clarity in painting, or maybe immediacy in dance. Not to mention things I see all around me every day that aren't considered art. I get more out of passing a gate that's in the shape of a sunset on a street with nothing 'natural' about it, than a sculpture attempting to create such an experience. (That's my work's failing right there!) Anyway, it's the 'way-in-which' – the process in relation to the intention – that I search for an affinity with, not just the final form.

Saying all that, there are some contemporary sculptors I can really relate to. I think Michael Dean is one of the most interesting artists working today. He fills up with noise this void between language and materiality, symbol and event, with a strange tenderness. His simultaneous care taken to and violence done to a book or a page feels so accurate to the conflicted place of immateriality in a world that's considered as concrete, physical, as

sculpture ... what sculpture can be in its most forlorn and brutish state: cold, just 'there'. This makes his work sometimes difficult to look at, but there's so much harsh love in it.

Guest Question: Matthew Barney and Sarah Lucas in conversation by Interview published in September 2018. 'How much are your decisions influenced by the place where you make work?'

JB: My studio is next to the Thames barrier. I can see it from my window actually. I think it would be impossible to pinpoint exactly how decisions are influenced by the environment I work in, but the fact that I'm so near to this monument to floods, their prevention, feels fortuitous – foreboding in a good way. Many of my sculptures and drawings imagine landscapes from deliberately anthropocentric perspectives, and considering these motifs, the image of river flowing through an open barrier feels more than fitting.

It makes sense, for me personally and of course other reasons too, that studio locations are often industrial, kind of bleak, or at least not quaint or comfortable. I can't imagine aspiring to work with the industrial materials I use from some country cottage, or the city centre. I have no desire to move out of the city, but if I ever did, the work would change – there's no doubt about that. There are so many reasons why the work is the way it is, some I'm more unaware of than others, but I'm sure that the life I've experienced in London is one of the most important. And the materials I use and reference are all around me here. The things I make are not at odds with this landscape; they are always in some way a part of it.

Interviewer: Josh Wright



'Landslide', 2019, Chalk on terracotta tiles, plywood, artificial grass, mortar, timber, painted mdf, 244 x 30 x 234cm

