

# Issue 08 – Amba Sayal-Bennett

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

Working across drawing, projection and sculptural installation, Amba Sayal-Bennett's work explores the materiality of language and the politics of abstraction.

SOS: This is the eighth interview in this series, when I started I didn't quite expect the lockdown to have stretched quite this far. What's been your experience of the lockdown? Have you been able to make work at this time?

ASB: Usually I'm either reading and writing, or in the studio working with materials, I find it hard to do both simultaneously. Now that my studio has become my laptop, these things are much more integrated which has been really generative. In terms of making work, it's been a time for exploration without intended output. I've also become more aware of overlapping interests with friends as lockdown has enabled new dynamics: maybe we wouldn't normally speak so frequently, and if we did, we'd just be catching up. Three friends in particular have been working within and around postcolonial discourse, one is currently being taught by Homi Bhabha. Something that's really defined this period for me has been thinking about my experience of having mixed British/Asian heritage through some of their recommendations and our informal exchanges. I've been watching lectures by Sara Ahmed, reading texts by Fred Moten, and also been loving the '2 Lizards' video series by Meriem Bennani and Orhan Berk which follows two self-isolating reptiles during lockdown in New York; I feel like it's really captured the zeitgeist. I recently watched a talk by Bennani about another of her

work's 'Party on the CAPS' where she touched upon the influence of sci-fi, in particular the idea of teleportation or re-materialising in another place in relation to diasporic experience. In my own work I'm interested in human and non-human assemblages and I've been thinking a lot about language as other (non-human but used by humans), but also something that others (as a tool of colonisation).

SOS: I'm interested in what you mean by human and non-human assemblages, can you expand on this?



'Hitch', 2019, Powder coated mild steel, fabric, foam, chemiwood, MDF and tape, 96 x 71 x 62 cm

ASB: Thinking about assemblages means thinking in terms of relationships between different entities which are changing and not fixed. In the context of my studio work, my practice could be understood as an assemblage of human and non-human parts: myself, materials, the context in which I work etc. Connected to this is an interest in Post-humanism. Ninety five percent of the neurotransmitters in our brain are made by bacteria in our gut which makes it hard to say where the human ends and microbiome begins. I'm not only interested in these kinds of physical instances that complicate stable and bounded notions of the human, but other encounters, including affective and pedagogical, that extend our notions of the makeup of 'human' subjectivity. In my studio practice, I think about how affective encounters such as irritation or boredom signal that some perceptual limit has been reached. New insights which develop from these encounters are contingent on my connectedness to materials and my experience of knowing is one of participation. I'm interested in how this learning takes place within a broader non-human context and can be understood as a form of post-human pedagogy. I've also been thinking about language as prosthesis, an inherited cutting apparatus that is used by humans but is not human. Language fails to articulate certain things (often less contained, fixed or stable) and is performative in its ability only to highlight or make visible certain ways of being. I guess I'm interested in how non-human entities or processes have agency in human-non-human assemblages. In the case of language, what biases are built into its infrastructure and what it enacts and perpetuates.

SOS: One of the reasons why I wanted to interview you is because of these digital renderings you've been producing. It seems that



Untitled, 2020, digital render.

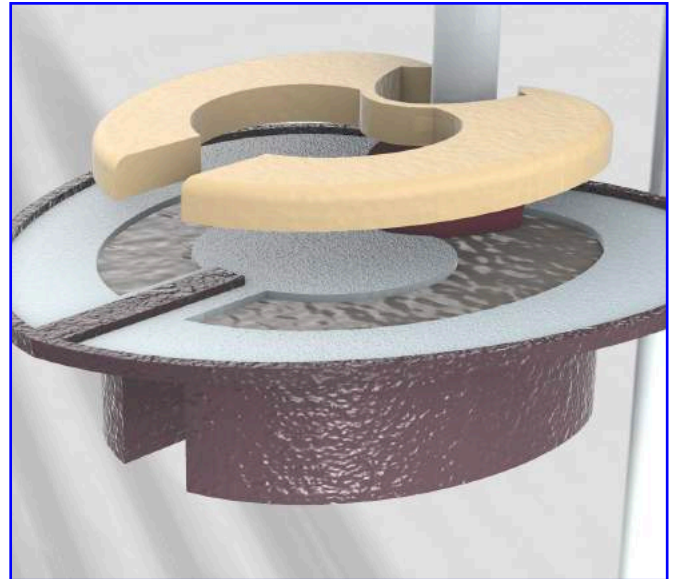
you've found quite a novel way of using the current limitations to both learn a new skill and generate ideas for new work. Can you talk a little bit about these renderings and how you see them functioning going forward?

ASB: I decided to teach myself Maya during the lockdown. When I first started working digitally, I was using SketchUp which is a very rudimentary free modelling program. For the last year I have been using Rhino which means there is the potential for a physical output to the drawings, for example waterjet cutting mild steel, printing resin and milling wood. Maya is better for rendering and animation which gives the drawings a different potential. It's slow progress because I'm just trying to familiarise myself with the software and its intimidating interface. In-between Maya exercises I've found myself wanting to play around on Rhino, the

digital renderings that I've been posting are a result of that procrastination. Before the lockdown modelling in Rhino was much more informed by physical material constraints and thinking about how I was going to make something. When you heat or weld metal you get distortions in the material, powder coating adds a 0.5mm thickness, so even things like how something would attach or fit together were material considerations that affected the digital drawing decisions. I think these recent renderings really exist as drawings, they seem to make sense circulating digitally and being viewed on screens. There is an impossibility in some of the forms as I've just been exploring what Rhino can do. It's very different working without physical constraints or thinking about outcome, however drawings can always inform how the physical work develops down the line. I used to work by translating paper drawings into SketchUp and then using those as plans for three-dimensional work. The recent Rhino renderings disrupt this process as I have been drawing directly in program. Since using Rhino, the work has also got more curved and organic in form. Whether I'm using a plastic stencil or a computer program I'm interested in how working with drawing apparatus de-limits parameters of engagement to produce a kind of hybrid aesthetic. I think it's interesting to think about in terms of how materials and processes have agency in the making process.

SOS: There is a material richness to your sculptures, you quite often contrast highly finished elements such as powder coated mild steel with tactile, everyday materials such as blue tack and foam. What draws you to these materials in particular?

ASB: I think working with metal makes a lot more sense than wood, which I was using before. As a sheet material it has a stronger



Untitled (detail), 2020, digital render.

relation to paper, it bends and folds. I saw some work of Ayesha Sultana in Delhi in January, these very densely covered works of graphite on paper. I initially thought they were folded metal. They really embodied this relation between paper, metal and drawing that I had been thinking about within my own work. In my drawings there is a strong interest in the diagrammatic, something that has the potential to be realised and that sits between two and three-dimensions. I realised how much I work in two-dimensions when I went on a carving residency last summer with artists Erin Hughes and Holly Graham who I run a public arts program called Cypher Billboard with. I was competent at carving reliefs into the stone but really struggled to think about a three-dimensional form within the rock. It had never occurred to me how 'flat' my working process is until that point. Even with the metal sculptures, welding and tacking bits together, there is almost an instantaneous transition from two to three-dimensions. In terms of the use of everyday materials such as blue tack and foam, I previously made large scale tape drawings, and it is really the adjustability of these materials that

appeals to me. Most of the decisions in the work are made through placement and rearrangement, so I don't like anything to be permanently fixed.

SOS: This guest question comes from an interview between Graham Gussin and Phyllida Barlow in 2005. Aside from your interests you spoke of earlier that have developed through lockdown. 'Are there particular individuals, artists, writers, film makers that you might say have been a source for you in your thinking and practice?'

ASB: The work of feminist theorist Karen Barad has had a big influence on my thinking and practice. I first encountered her work when I was doing my PhD and many of the ideas outlined in 'Meeting The Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning' impacted how I understood the importance of methodology. For Barad things do not precede their relation, but rather emerge through particular intra- actions. She suggests that the world exists in an entangled state and that apparatus' of observation make agential cuts between what is included and excluded from consideration. I'm interested in the performative nature of this dynamic and the agency of observation in methods of research. Rather than passively reflecting on a world to be discovered, the way in which the world comes to be and comes to be known are entangled processes. I started to think about how methods are the enactment or crafting of boundaries between what is present, what is manifestly absent, and othered. In my studio practice I've been exploring the nature of boundary making through a radical formal simplification of this process: using geometry and line. I have also been staging writing experiments in response to a recent realisation which stemmed from my thinking around tools, instruments and methods. In my PhD thesis I spoke a lot about material agency

within studio practice but had ironically overlooked the agency of the medium that I was using: writing. The need for coherence and clarity directed how the research developed and undermined the things I was exploring, things that were a-signifying, affective and working against representation. In other words, the text expressed and performed two different ontologies. If methods are performative, then we need to think critically and carefully about the means by which we generate knowledge and the ethics of inquiry such as how to research with care.

SOS: And finally to close, what's keeping you positive in lockdown?

ASB: Speaking to friends, clearing out a lot of stuff and running has been keeping me positive.

Interviewer: Josh Wright



'Cue', 2019, Powder coated mild steel, wood, foam, tape, celotex, chemiwood, fabric, paint, blu tack. 124 x 83 x 30cm