

# Issue 10 – Alexandra Searle

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

Alexandra Searle is a London-based sculptor. Drawing on references to the medical and the mental from her own experiences with anxiety and hypochondria, her sculptures play upon the tensions, fragilities and failures involved when trying to keep ourselves in a delicate equilibrium, both in body and mind.

SOS: This is the tenth interview in this series with contemporary sculptors, whilst the restrictions are certainly easing we find ourselves still very much in lockdown. How have you and your practice adapted to the lockdown?

AS: Just before the lockdown I managed to bring some basic materials back to my partner's flat in east London – he has a patch of outside decking. I'm furloughed from my gallery job, so I have been pottering around and making small-scale plaster and Jesmonite works (making a big mess of said decking) just to keep myself busy. It's brought me back to the slow process of mould-making, which I find quite therapeutic if I'm not in a rush. It's also given me time to plan future works that are perhaps more ambitious than I would usually attempt, with my new appreciation for the space and tools I had before. My practice draws heavily on my own health-fueled anxiety, so for me it's been a mix of coping with the virus and my own mental health in isolation, and also, somewhat ashamedly, some intrigue and inspiration from a global health pandemic. As the lockdown lifts I have recently started venturing to my far away Woolwich studio on the DLR at off-peak times, though I'm still a

little uncomfortable with it, but I hope to be back there more.

SOS: Your seductive sculptures ooze, twist and fold with the fullness of a body. I would say the materials you use are objectively attractive to humans and have gender associated with them in some way. What drives your interest in materials and the physicality of materials?

AS: Primarily, curiosity and finiteness. My piece In A Slump containing a puddle of cod liver oil, for example, allures many viewers to dip in their fingers. This is not a pleasant experience, and



'Rock And A Soft Place', 2020, concrete, plaster, carnauba wax, pigment, 35 x 25 x 12cm

leaves them with a stubborn smell. Still, there is the visceral need to do it. We find the breaking of surface tensions, or organic-looking surfaces pleasing because we cannot satisfy that curiosity through anything other than touch. My works point to our concealed inner workings, the architecture of our bodies, organs, digestive fluids. Perhaps these things are the biggest point of seduction, because we can never have the satisfaction of touching them. Similarly, in my works that are more concerned with tension, I think an object is seductive directly before its collapse – like a swaying house of cards.

There is a focus in my work of the body as something that, with wear and tear, will be used until no longer usable. Often, my materials solidify a temporary moment in time. The corrosion of copper, a delicate inflatable, or the quickly rancid turning of consumable liquids speak of the fleetingness and finiteness of being alive. I explore the medicines and mechanisms we utilise in our attempts to extend this duration.

The apprehension or empathy we may feel for the works as they collapse, rot or deflate is my attempt to bring life, and inevitably death, into my materials.

In terms of gender, masculine is wedded with feminine in my work; anatomy is ambiguous. Often using typically and art-historically male construction materials, and traditionally female techniques such as the hand-made, I also play with gendered colour palettes. I am interested in the juxtaposition of form and material, and how the hardness and softness of bodies and genitalia are often so synonymous with the strength and fragility that sex and gender can bring about, even, and especially, where these conceptions are inaccurate or absurd.



'In A Slump', 2019, glass, steel, cod liver oil, 45 x 45 x 12cm.

SOS: [Guest Question] Adapted from an interview with Lynda Benglis and Tracy Zwick in 2014. 'What inspired your colour choices?' You tend to combine a soft pastel palette in contrast with the raw, natural colours of concrete or timber.

AS: While my colour choices are very deliberate, I rarely add colour to my materials; I am fascinated by existing colours in everyday items. Medical materials include barely-there hospital greens and stomach-turning peaches and beiges of slings and bandages. Bright pinks and glossy yellows of liquid medicine give a jarring nod to undistinguishable bodily fluids. The colour of each material has a purpose; to contrast with the red of blood, or to attempt to match a vague skin colour. I also love the garish artificial colours of industrial materials like ratchet straps and dust sheets. There is a pure pragmatism to the colour palette of industry, oblivious to its beauty.

The natural colours of industrial materials are only of interest to me due to our pre-conceived knowledge of them. The way we expect concrete, for example, to behave can be challenged by showing it's malleable, voluptuous, unstable properties. So, it is important that it be kept recognisable as concrete for this subversion, or questioning, of the material to be achieved.

My glass pieces, however, are tinted. Some mock the colour of the liquid they contain, others have a pink hue like a lung or an unspecified organ. When shaped in malleable forms, we are again transported to their former liquidity. Glass's fragility speaks of our own; the air that inflates it gifted directly from human lungs.

Opaqueness and translucency are also important to me – in a very visceral and tactile way they address outsides and insides, permeable membranes, skins and contents, mass and weightlessness.

SOS: What's more exciting to you the idea or the execution? Do you make drawings for larger works or do work you more intuitively?

AS: The idea and the execution of my works are so intertwined that I can barely separate them. I often make drawings with the intention of them becoming sculptures, but they just become drawings for their own sake – they are often the death of the idea, because I can see how it might look and then I lose interest. I know how I want a piece to look but I can only express that physically, through the materials, and not on paper, which is frustrating at times.

As the forms of my works are often determined by gravity and the forces and restraints acting upon them, there is much trial and error in my working process; I stretch and burst and pull and

push things until they resemble the vague idea I began with.

Before the material becomes solid, I have usually set up a chaotic and elaborate mechanism involving weights, ropes and gaffa tape to hold the object very precariously in place. I think it is this stress, desperation and constant failure in the making of the work that gives it its appeal or unease when finished; you can sense the closeness to ruin. Because of this, I consider the execution a large and important part of the work itself, and I'd like the work to reflect this playfulness alongside its more serious subject matters.



'Not At All And Then All At Once' (detail), 2020, amber rosin, steel, epoxy putty, 200 x 12 x 12cm.



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

AS: Very much so – I have been obsessing with Olga Balema's 2015 *Cannibals* exhibition recently. She uses PVC sacs of liquid deal with the tension between material resilience and fragility, and the interface between inside and out. Steel rusting into, literally digested by, the water that surrounds it, turning it a murky yellow. This osmosis, this transfer or containment, and ultimately this material tension and all of its formal and physiological connotations are concepts that underpin my own practice.

Nairy Baghramian's clamped masses and gleaming aluminium skeletons are a constant source of inspiration to me, and I'm currently also enjoying looking back at Rachel Whiteread's floppy and fleshy rubber casts of mattresses and used bathtubs; all things that evoke the less seemly side of human existence.

SOS: And finally, what are you working on at the moment?

AS: I was mainly focused on exhibiting work in 2019, and now that exhibitions have been put on

hold I'm excited to get back to making. Now that I'm gradually getting back to my studio, I've got a re-instated enthusiasm for material experimentation – seeing which materials will mix with others, which will be incompatible, looking at irreversible processes and how heat and time effect things. My studio is turning into somewhat of a laboratory, actually. The pandemic has made me become more conscious of the passing of time, so I'm really interested in using time as a material itself at the moment. Luckily just before lockdown I had welded a few armatures, reminiscent of clinical beds and drip hangers. I'm now trying to find ways of intermingling these bizarre apparatuses with some cast objects.

In terms of content, I'm currently having thoughts of a new series around the expression of being 'sick to the back teeth'. Having thought a lot recently about sickness, being utterly fed up, and seeing scenes on the news of people resorting to their own dentistry, I think there's a lot to relate to and unpack from this single expression. It's a mix of figurative and literal, so I'm excited to see where that may take me.

Interviewer: Josh Wright

SOS

'The Only Thing Keeping Me Going', 2019, polythene dust sheets, aluminium, epoxy putty, ventilation tubes, air (variable dimensions)