

Issue 14 – Grace Woodcock

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

Grace Woodcock makes soft sculptures and wearables in reaction to ‘touch hunger’: the strange discord between our need for physical intimacy and our increasingly immaterial lives. The sculptures present as non-human replacements for structural support, relaxation aids, or learning aids for a lost tactile sense. 1960s Space Age aesthetic permeates the work with retro-futurism, mourning a lost optimism for the future, while imagining new cushioned environments more attentive to our physical form.

SOS: A reoccurring question in this series of interviews has been about this year and the impact of the pandemic on artists’ practice. How have you managed these two lockdowns? Has it changed the way you work at all?

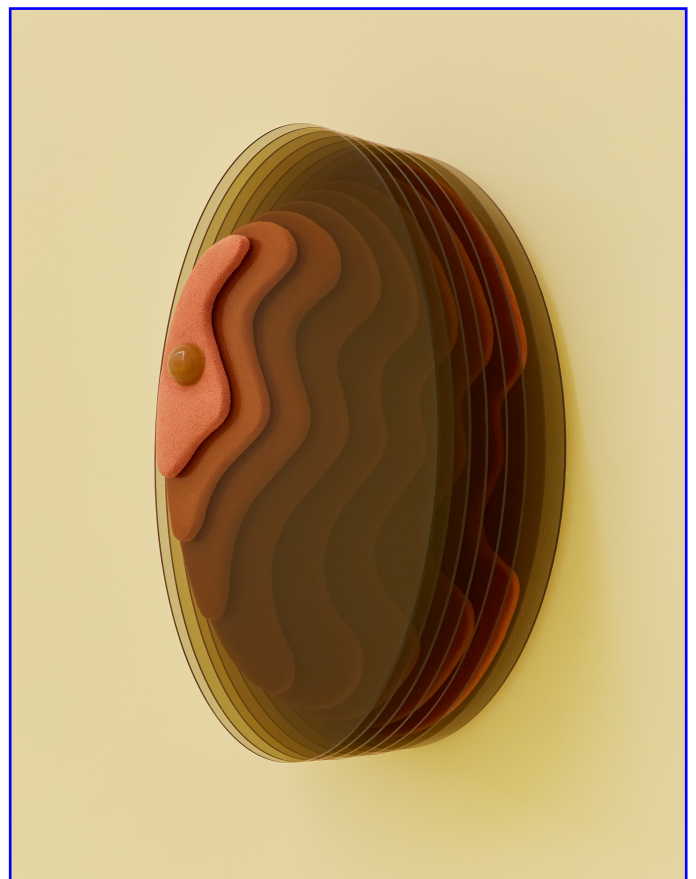
GW: I’ve found it quite difficult actually. Suddenly feeling strung out, like I had all the time in the world, but without anything to ground me, no routine, all my work being cancelled, and I found it hard to concentrate.

I feel lucky to have had a deadline to help me focus. I spent the first lockdown drawing and planning the work for my September show at Castor, GUT-BRAIN. I could carry on working at home on CAD, but the work was stuck in the virtual for a lot longer than it would usually be. I couldn’t get anything cut or test anything out until the lockdown eased but the extra time forced me to obsessively fiddle with all the files again and again.

I got really into microbial research and became determined to generate a spatial and physical

experience with the installation of my show. Something to make it worth visiting in person—so I made a big sunken-living room space and painted it this buttery-pale-slightly-stomach-acid yellow. It made the work feel like it was floating and messed with your vision as the corners of the room almost disappeared.

During this winter lockdown, I’ve been working on my first edition. The repetition of constructing a set of small-scale sculptures has been helping give me a sense of rhythm and motivation.



'Bolus' 2020, Bronze tint perspex, silicone, stainless steel bolt, suedette, upholstery foam, zinc oxide, pro and prebiotic powder, and spirulina. 37 x 22 x 14.5 cm.

SOS: Your works are often comprised of various materials and textures quite seamlessly woven together. How does all of this begin? Does drawing play an important role?

GW: I tend to have a basic outline of how I want a sculpture to work in my head before I start – a sense of the curves, the feeling I want it to have, the vague shapes of any recesses. Sometimes I'll do a very quick structural drawing to record the idea, but generally speaking I'll work straight into CAD, drawing in Rhino. I'll start that drawing with a specific scale which I measure in the air, I guess relating the size of the work to my body, my arm-span, or whatever scale feels right for the interaction I have in mind.

I'll then digitally sculpt out a full form as I want it. It's great because nothing is fixed and one piece can go through so many iterations before it is ready and I find that flexibility really generative. Once I've landed on something that feels right I'll set about splicing and deconstructing that ready to CNC cut and upholster. The wireframe line drawings which come out of the software are actually an interesting counterpoint to the fleshed-out, biomorphic sculptures they represent – they're so complicated and kind of ghostly but I'm yet to make anything of them.

Only the hard elements come into the virtual side of the making, the bare bones for upholstery and any perspex elements which need to fit into the structure. The materials and textures you see don't come into the drawing at all. I spend a lot of time shopping around for fabrics, considering the feeling and tactility I'm looking for in balance with formal concerns like stretch, wear, opacity. I tend to use variations on one set of fabrics for each body of work, so



those textural concerns are often already in mind when I start the work.

SOS: [Guest Question] I have used a question from the landmark interview between Cindy Nemser and Eva Hesse once before and it's always an interview I refer back to. "How do you feel about craftsmanship in the process of your work?"

GW: My works tend to take very self-contained forms, they have a strange object-ness and solidity which I like. The quality is really important in pulling that off – I think the piece being well made gives it an aura of preciousness or an allure – but there is a fine line before something gets too perfect. Nothing works when it is too perfect and there has to be some kind of interruption or tension to the surface. There are wrinkles in the thermo-polyurethane surfaces, vein-like cords running under the surfaces, lumps and growths coming out of the back of the work.

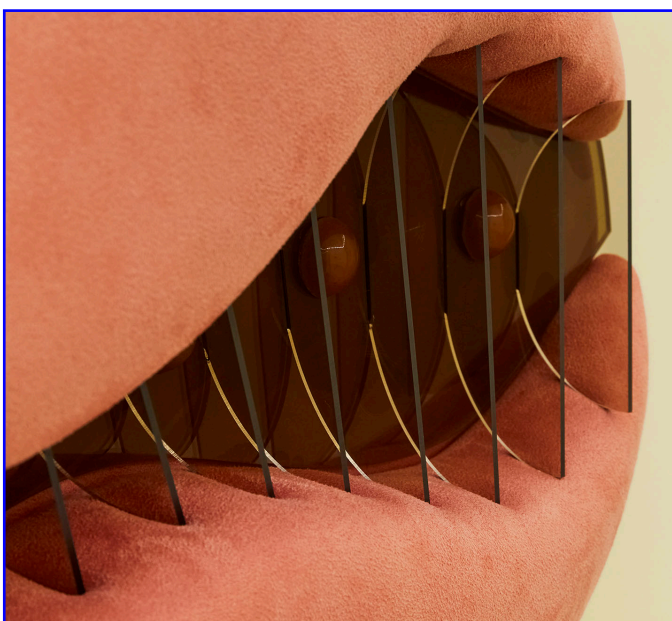


TOP RIGHT: 'Portal for Magnotherapy', 2019, Magnets, bronze-tint perspex, latex, neoprene-jersey, power mesh, high-density upholstery foam, and mild steel. 95 x 70 x 50 cm. Shot by Corie McGowan

I come from a family of makers, designers and really skilled crafts people – my mum in particular is incredible with textiles and I’ve grown up sewing, knitting and weaving – so I’ll always have respect for craftsmanship. These skills never came into my practice until the last few years where I began to upholster the surfaces of my sculptures. While upholstery isn’t a craft I have any training in there will always be an expectation of quality in the back of my mind. I’m learning as I go. It’s a technique I use very honestly because I wanted the work to be cushioned, with a palpable squish. I guess there’s a kind of fetish in making which comes into the allure I mentioned before. My work is usually wall based but I will finish off the entirety of the work regardless of whether you’ll see it – sometimes the upholstered backs are as good as the front and I find something really pleasing in that.

SOS: Could you talk more about your relationship to the materials you use – perspex, silicone, suedette, pro and pre-biotic powder to name a few. What is your attraction to each material and how do they relate to one another?

GW: I want to keep the work fairly minimal to keep



‘Cnidaria I’, 2020, Bronze tint perspex, silicone, stainless steel bolt, suedette, upholstery foam, zinc oxide, prebiotic powder and spirulina. 46 x 70 x 14cm.



attention on the subtle irregularity of the form of each work. The work in GUT-BRAIN combined suedette with TPU (thermo-polyurethane). The downy texture of suedette looks as soft as it feels, and when layered with the TPU something strange happens as it squashes the pile of the fabric a little, it frosts over the colour and forms a barrier to the texture under this almost-transparent, plastic skin. The combination blurs the surface and makes it hard to focus on what you’re looking at. It balances between organic/synthetic and that is why I like it. The TPU has clinical connotations which feel appropriate for this year of wipe clean surfaces. Bronze-tint perspex is so versatile – I’ve heat formed domes with it, fused it into architectural tracts, layered it up into infinity-like portals. Its rigidity and reflective qualities work in productive contrast to the cushioned, matte suedette and it throws back to a kind of 60s/70s space age realm.

I treat the sculptures like bodies trialling out alternative therapies. Copper tipped acupuncture needles pierce the surfaces and look like they’re ‘charging up’ the work through these delicate



TOP RIGHT: ‘SPH II’, 2020, Suedette, TPU, upholstery foam, pro and prebiotic powder and zinc oxide. 50.5 x 37.5 x 15 cm.



Installation view of 'GUT-BRAIN' at Castor, 2020.

rods - besides the restorative capacity of acupuncture, copper is an essential nutrient for red blood cells, immune function, and iron absorption. Neodymium magnets pull materials together as though they're under Magnotherapy, an alternative practice drawing the iron in the blood to help arthritis, chest infections or bad circulation. Under the surface of the work, within the layers of board, foam and fabric, I tuck in silicone-infused with zinc oxide, spirulina, or probiotics. Maybe that's only for my benefit, but maybe, like an alchemist take on Wilhelm Reich's Orgone theory, it adds an unseen power.

SOS: You recently spoke with Jillian Knipe about being influenced by science fiction, dystopian novels and the work of Octavia Butler. I'm curious to know what you are reading at present?

GW: I'm actually back on Octavia Butler, I'm reading *Parable of the Sower*, 1993. It's a real climate dystopia set in 2024 in LA where society has completely unravelled. The main character has extreme 'hyperempathy' so she experiences other people's feelings as though they're her own. I'm also reading Svetlana Boym's *Future Nostalgia*, which is a gorgeous, dense philosophical, historical, and personal investigation into nostalgia. I have finally managed to get my hands on a copy of Eva Hesse's diaries too which I can't wait to get stuck into - I read Lucy Lippard's book *Eva Hesse*, a couple of years ago now and it left such a big impression on me.

Interviewer: Josh Wright

