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Statement of Practice

Peripatetic Making: A borrowed space, time continuum

Phoebe Cummings

Phoebe Cummings creates highly detailed, temporary sculptures and environments from clay. The work is often built directly on site, and where possible, the same clay is reclaimed and reused at different locations. Over the past eight years she has worked without a permanent studio space, often developing work through residencies, or using the gallery space as a temporary workshop. In 2008 she was awarded an Arts/Industry residency at the Kohler Co. factory, and was Ceramics artist-in-residence at the Victoria & Albert Museum, 2010. She was the winner of the British Ceramics Biennial Award in 2011 and was Ceramics Fellow at Camden Arts Centre, 2012/13.

Abstract

Reflecting on experiences of working in different places, Cummings considers aspects of her approach to working with clay and the ways in which her practice shifts. From the Arctic to Hawaii, factory to museum, Cummings explores how the separate characteristics of these environments have informed her work and processes, and the continuity within her practice as a whole.

Keywords: time, detail, reconstruct, labor, fluency, doubt, plasticity

The Royal Courts of Justice, London, 2006

Queuing to enter the building through a somewhat unexpected gift shop, I waited to present my bankruptcy petition (and managed to navigate the entrance without buying an appealing souvenir mug to commemorate my financial demise from the gift shop). The gothic, cathedral-like architecture attracts tourists as well as those attending hearings. Beyond the

grandeur of the original building, in a tucked-away office of sympathetically null design, I swore an oath and declared I had nothing. I was 24 and had only graduated a couple of months previously.

While studying, I never really questioned the studio model. It seemed to be the formula for how a professional artist operated, particularly if involved in a material-specific practice where there was a long list of things you would *need* in order to make work. I soon realized that permanently hiring/inhabiting a studio was unrealistic. I had salvaged some bags of clay from another project at the end of college, and there seemed to be three options of what to do with it: to make things that might play to a commercial market, to get rid of it and forget about ceramics altogether, or earn money through various low-paid jobs and make what interested me most, like an embarrassingly elaborate and consuming hobby. I chose the latter.

There was a self-imposed condition that the salvaged material should be kept in a state that could continually be reclaimed, so that my making might continue indefinitely and only cost me in time. From this point on, my studio comprised of clay, a bucket of water and a board; an already portable piece of board into which my Dad cut a handle-hole for extra ease of carrying, like a primitive forerunner to the briefcase. As such, I could work pretty much anywhere.

Bolwick Hall, Norfolk, 2007

Movement is significant, in different ways. I move my materials and mobile studio from place to place, but simply walking around is the way I usually familiarize myself with a new place: walking and seeing where I

keep returning to or stand still; walking and making lists, seeing which words I write over again; it is a simultaneous process of gathering and eliminating. I adopted this approach at Bolwick Hall, the first residency I undertook after graduating. I developed an instinctive way of trying to grasp an understanding of the site in which I was working rather than working to a preconceived plan. On reflection, I recognize this process of walking and writing recurring in every project since.

Making also choreographs physical movements, more noticeably so if the process is repetitive. The specificity of a task strips away any superfluous actions, and you end up with something purposeful and gradually automatic. There is always a stage of pleasure that comes from knowing what I am doing for a while, followed later, by boredom. I think I like both, or at least both are necessary. Then, there is a slightly competitive endurance to complete the task, to give the care and commitment that allows things to emerge, but with no sentimentality towards the outcome.

Within the grounds, I worked at the edge of the lake, balancing on a plank of wood to lower a hand-rolled carpet of clay onto the silt bed inside a boathouse. Over several weeks it gradually slumped and sank (Figure 1). This residency, like the work produced, was brief, and during the three weeks the site became an important raw material to be manipulated and responded to, as important as the clay I took there. There was a freedom in working so immediately in a location, and the format of a residency allowed me the borrowed space and time I needed to do it. It confirmed that dislocated periods of activity could be productive and that my itinerant bucket/



Fig 1 Phoebe Cummings, *Below*, 2007, Bolwick Hall, Norfolk. Clay, approx. 80 cm × 120 cm.



Fig 2 Phoebe Cummings, Detail from *Ultima Thule*, 2008, St Michael's Church, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. Clay, cement, 5 m × 7 m.

board was in no way restrictive; the limitation opened up new possibilities.

Upernavik Museum, Greenland, 2007

Time is slippery in the constant darkness: the arctic night lasts three months. The luminous green numbers beaming from the clock on the microwave oven were an arbitrary system for organizing my day; life

operated on the edge of absurdity. Unwilling to use half of my baggage allowance on clay, in favor of the maximum volume of thermal clothing, this was the first concentrated period of time I had tried to work without it. I realized how much I think through clay, and I struggled to know how to process ideas. I tried cutting and gluing paper (clay-colored paper; a pathetic ode to the absent material), I tried modeling bread

dough (too clumsy, my attempts here even more pathetic) and then settled on reading, making notes and drawing to keep my hands busy so I could think. In such an extreme environment, a lot of time was also occupied just by living.

Upernavik Museum is the northernmost museum in the world and has a library as well as a collection of objects and buildings. The research from this residency was to culminate in an exhibition back in the UK (Figure 2), and the separation between places, and my separation from the material, led to a systematic approach to making. I became interested in the settlement of Thule, both as a location I was forbidden to visit due to military restrictions and also the connections in its name to “Ultima Thule,” the mythical vision of the north before exploration. The community at Thule had been moved out to make way for an American airbase in 1953, and it seemed a place of harsh reality and fiction. I attempted to construct the landscape and original settlement from clay, informed by maps, written descriptions and archived photographs in the museum. The research resulted in a system for making, but the construction was ultimately one of fiction. The work grew out of an interest in the gaps, like those between the geographic and magnetic North Pole; here even facts seemed soft and prone to wandering. Beyond an attempt to translate an experience into a piece of work, this residency was perhaps more significant as an experience of time and landscape that was utterly *other*, two aspects of my practice that continue to be important.

Kohler Co., Wisconsin, 2008

Fluency is part of the lure of making things, searching for a point where things make

sense in my hands. In the factory, whole teams of people are dedicated to making things perfectly, consistently, and with exceptional skill. Everything has fluency. So much gets made to ensure the delivery of the final product: things that shrink, prop, and support the emerging form through various processes. Racks, stacked with ware, push and swing around tracks from the ceiling: long, long corridors of ware. Everyone has the confidence and ease that comes with the repetition of handling and specialism. Sometimes the hand casters work in pairs, they know each other’s movements like their own; production is mesmerizing.¹

The factory is also a number of things aside from a place of manufacturing: part museum, part tourist destination, part design center, part laboratory. There are noticeably few women outside the decal department and offices. It is hard not to romanticize the experience of being at Kohler; there was a continuous soundtrack of country music drifting from radios day and night, and there was clay, on tap. The factory provided the ultimate studio.

A cautionary sign declared “VARIATION IS THE ENEMY OF QUALITY.” I occupied myself with purposely variable production during my residency there, spending hours painting out thin layers of slip onto plaster then peeling them off with a metal tool and stacking them to form dense, delicate walls (Figure 3). It was a bit like working a fast food grill, both mindless and mindful, and I liked the challenge of trying to build something solid from a liquid. The economic crash had an impact. There were several weeks where production was suddenly reduced, although the kilns kept running. Things felt unsettled and fragile. I began



Fig 3 Phoebe Cummings during an Arts/Industry residency at Kohler Co. Wisconsin, 2008. Photo: ©John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

sweeping the areas around the casting benches, collecting the waste, sieving it and spraying it to form a long, layered line on the factory floor while I waited for production to resume.

Spode Factory, Stoke-on-Trent, 2009

I was unprepared for the quantity of personal objects that remained. A dehydrated cup of tea on the edge of a desk, spare shoes, soft porn: things spilled in the aftermath. In places the roof was leaking and pools had formed below, pigeon shit was building up thick and heavy like deranged rococo plasterwork. On the floor was a book, *The Drowned World* by J. G. Ballard. Maybe an employee had been reading it during their break before the factory closed in 2008. This place was straight from a Ballard novel; even the book was sprouting mold as if reverting to some primordial life form. I keep it in a glass case; it is still growing, slowly.

A voice grated from his headphones; “Strangman here, Kerans. How’s the grey sweet mother of us all?”

“Feels like home. I’ve nearly reached the bottom now. The diving cage is over by the entrance.”

He sank his knees into the soft loam which covered the floor; and steadied himself against a barnacled lamp-post. In a relaxed, graceful moon-stride he loped slowly through the deep sludge, which rose from his footprints like clouds of disturbed gas. On his right side were the dim flanks of the buildings lining the sidewalk, the silt piled in soft dunes up to their first floor windows.²

I picked up a plate shard; it offered a glimpse of a typical picturesque design. It was the beginning of an ongoing trail of thought about design and environment, surface and place, scenery and staging. I made a scene from clay in one of the puddles on the floor; it collapsed within an

hour, no one ever saw it. I took the shard of plate away and reconstructed its scene inside a cardboard box, also collected from the factory floor. I have read *The Drowned World* at least four times since then.

Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2010

I think I have a high tolerance for detail, both observing it and making it. Among other things, six months in the V&A taught me how to look at objects, providing a luxurious amount of time to unpeel them. I did not gloss over the collection looking for my own personal preferences, as I might have done if only there for an hour. Even objects which appeared garish at first glance usually revealed something to hold on to once you engaged in the details, and every day I spent

some time just walking and looking. The relationship between looking and making was direct, translating elements of surface pattern and design into a three-dimensional environment within the V&A's ceramic studio, which operated like an enlarged glass museum case. Inside, a landscape grew (Figures 4 and 5).

There are certain ceramic techniques that are always considered amateurish; squashing clay through a tea strainer, garlic press, or other kitchen implement might fit into this category. Children tend to find the transformation from lump to worms audibly entertaining, especially if rather than clay you squash sweet, cheerful dough. Historically, these clay extrusions have been a way of suggesting the detailed textures of grass or fur on ceramic objects, often appearing at



Fig 4 View of ceramics residency studio, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2010. Photo: Sylvain Deleu.



Fig 5 Detail from ceramics residency studio, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2010. Clay. Photo: Sylvain Deleu.

the base of figurines or covering a creature as hand-finished additions to cast ware. Even when used in factory production of decorative objects there is still a perceived crudeness to the delicacy of the texture, something less serious than carving or casting. It is playful.

My favorite example of this use of extruded clay is an earthenware inkstand in the V&A collection (Figure 6). It is an odd object, an adult and child ape sit together reading a book. Their proportions are off, unnatural, more yeti than ape; the elder has a thick, mature fur of this wormy texture.



Fig 6 *Inkstand*, probably made at the factory of Giustiniani, Naples, Italy, ca. 1800–1820. Cream-colored earthenware. Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London.



Fig 7 Extruding clay through a tea strainer, 2012. Photo: Sylvain Deleu.

Looking closely, the strands have a round profile, so were not forced through the mesh of a tea strainer, but nonetheless were forced through small perforations. It is curlier than I make, a longer piece of clay must have been pushed, I imagine they used something like a syringe extruder.

From the shelves in the ceramic studio at the V&A I built long drooping masses covered in this texture. I spent a whole week forcing clay through tea strainers (Figure 7). I am left-handed but always perform this action with my right hand, unless it aches too much, then I clumsily use my left. When it started to gather

over large areas it became more intriguing. Nothing in particular, but somewhere between animal and vegetal.

University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 2013

Doubt is peripatetic, and can be productive. The uncertainty whether or not I can do something, or if the material will allow me to do something, often provides a drive. Extruding over a tonne of clay in Hawaii seemed at times a self-inflicted Sisyphian task in paradise. There was the added guilt that I inflicted the same undertaking on a large group of volunteers, as I was commissioned to make a piece in the University gallery, with the assistance of students, over a three-week period.

In places, Hawaii's land mass is still forming, and the beauty of nature is almost excessive. In the gallery, our process was labor-intensive and my doubts of completion and of the clay staying suspended from the ceiling quietly peaked on a daily, if not hourly, basis. I brought with me as many tea

strainers as I could buy and sheets of fine steel mesh, embroidery hoops, and electrical tape to make my own, cheaper, tools which could easily be repaired.

Gravity had been an interest in several other projects, and I wanted to construct a situation where the audience, could stand beneath the material, in this case an iron-rich red clay, similar in color to the local ground. Covering the suspended armature with a rough base of clay may seem devoid of any real skill, but it was crucial that it was done in a certain way to allow for shrinkage and to support the weight of the clay texture then applied (Figure 8).

It was unfamiliar not to have complete control over the making process, but the resulting piece also seemed enriched by the multiple hands responsible for its making, hands that were encoded in the surface of the form. A large extruder was brought into the gallery and adapted with the embroidery hoops to increase the rate of production by manufacturing big clumps of texture. They



Fig 8 Phoebe Cummings, *Cella*, 2013, University of Hawaii Art Gallery, Honolulu. Clay, chicken wire, wood, steel cable, approx. 1 m × 1 m × 9 m. Photo: Brandon Ng courtesy University of Hawaii Art Gallery.



Fig 9 Plate, produced by E. Challinor, ca. 1819–1822. Lead glazed earthenware, transfer printed. Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

were wilder than when produced by hand, and both methods had individual qualities depending on the laborer(s). The work was heavy. Things accumulated and a defiant topography emerged.

Spode Factory, Stoke-on-Trent, 2013

Returning to Spode, the factory seemed paused in between its history and future. A lot had been cleared in the four years since

my first visit, it had become less personal. In an area of wasteland between the perimeter fence and the building, I accidentally walked onto the set of a low-budget zombie film which was being made on site. Were we turning the site into a theme park of decline? I asked myself as I reconstructed a scene from a transfer printed plate (Figure 9) inside a polythene enclosure I had made inside the factory (Figure 11). I tried to reassure myself that no activity altogether would be worse.



Fig 10 Phoebe Cummings, "After the Death of the Bear", Victoria & Albert Museum, 2010. Porcelain, glaze sieve, approx. 25 cm × 20 cm. Photo: Sylvain Deleu.



Fig 11 Phoebe Cummings, "After the Death of the Bear", British Ceramics Biennial, Stoke-on-Trent, 2013. Clay, steel, wire, polythene, 5 m × 7 m × 3 m. Photo: Sylvain Deleu.

Downloaded by [Phoebe Cummings] at 09:10 30 January 2016



Fig 12 Phoebe Cummings' dissolving *Production Line*, Southampton City Art Gallery, 2015. A temporary clay work commissioned and documented for the permanent collections of Southampton City Art Gallery, York Art Gallery and Shipley Art Gallery. Photo: Paul Haywood.

"*The Death of the Bear*" was a design produced by Spode and other Staffordshire manufacturers in the early nineteenth century and the scene it depicts brings to mind George Orwell's essay, *Shooting an*

Elephant, and all of the complex, disgusting, idiocy of Imperialism.³ I thought too about the bones of Mona the elephant in Etruria Industrial Museum nearby. She was a circus elephant that had died after eating the

leaves of a yew tree in a local churchyard in 1898 and was not the only elephant that had died in the city: Stoke-on-Trent was once a frequent winter home for traveling circuses. The Etruria Industrial Museum had been a bone and flint mill for the ceramics industry. Mona's bones were taken there, but some were never ground down and hang on the wall. The Spode factory seemed a lot like the bear, and those elephants: all fallen giants.

I first came across the design in the collection at the V&A, where I made a small version on top of a glaze sieve I found in the studio, roughly the same diameter as the plate (Figure 10). I wanted to take the scene back to the factory, and construct it on a scale to walk around; to make an environment that was still dripping, cracking, shrinking, expanding, and dissolving, like everything else around it.

I have not made anything for several months. Making continues to be itinerant and often happens in intensive blocks, although the fractured pace does not equate to a lack of commitment or gaps in thinking. Places inform and direct the work, and often provide vastly different environments to work in, but there is continuity in the approach to moving and thinking with the material (Figure 12). No one body of work

is entirely separate from another; things dart back and forth between locations and times, in processes and thoughts. I am not very interested in holding onto what is made, but things may resurface in different locations, in different ways, and there is an ongoing curiosity which is constant. Plasticity and malleability are significant qualities of clay, and I try to extend those properties into the way in which I work.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion between makers at the Kohler factory in Wisconsin and a small group of historians/curators including Ethan W. Lasser, Glenn Adamson, Ezra Shales, David Gates, Tavs Jorgensen, Beth Lipman, Kate Smith, and Michael Eden see Ethan W. Lasser, "Factory Craft: Art and Industry in Conversation," *Journal of Modern Craft* 6(3) (November 2013). See also Ezra Shales, "Mass Production as an Academic Imaginary (or, if more *must* be said of Marcel 'Evacuating Duchampian Conjecture in the Age of Recursive Scholarship')," *Journal of Modern Craft* 6(3) (November 2013).
- 2 J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (New York: Berkley Books, 1962), p. 105.
- 3 George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant," *New Writing* (Autumn 1936).