



Lucy Whitford interviewed
by Ellen Mara De Wachter on
7 January 2013

Ellen Mara De Wachter: Can you describe some of the processes and techniques you have used to make the works in this show?

Lucy Whitford: Most of the works are made up of a mixture of fired ceramic, unfired clay, steel and plaster. There are also found and collected objects such as foam blocks, embroidery material and pre-woven cane. I've used grogged black clay, which is quite an architectural material that can be used to make big, bold works. It's very dark, rich and textured. Then there's finer black fired clay, which I use in a way similar to the way I have previously used unfired clay. The technique is to pull out from a block of clay with my hands and fingers. I've also extended this technique by adding porcelain to highlight aspects of the work such as its colour and texture. There are also extruded works, for which I pass a lump of clay through a machine which pushes out a coil in a given shape. With the unfired clay, I start to pull from a lump, and as I pull, it tells me quite clearly where it is weak and where it is strong. At different points, depending how long I've had the clay out for, it has a different resistance and I have to work with it in a different way, taking into account how much it's changed from its original wet state. That's one of the nice things about working with clay; it keeps me moving. I've also used air-drying clay, which has added material within it: a nylon that keeps it stronger, as opposed to the unfired clay, which doesn't have anything supporting its own shapes.

EMDW: There's an element of chance in the way you accumulate the found materials you incorporate with your clay or plaster sculptural elements, but this chance also feels consistent. Perhaps it's a kind of controlled chance.

LW: I'm quite instinctive about how I find materials; I might see something in a shop, on an item of clothing, or in a scrapyard, and see a form I like, and then

I will source something like it. I also go through skips, and one of the lovely things about this way of finding materials is that it takes me out of my 'ordinary'. The process of selection is clearly dictated by my taste, but it does take me a little bit further. I recently found a piece of cane material that has black patterned marks on it, and is made up of small panels of cane. I've unpicked the material, and some of those pieces of cane will appear in the show. They have also informed some of the other works in the show, because of the way they move and look. I also tend to keep things I find around my studio for a long time, where they are like reminders to me. Generally I find use for things I collect; it has to do with which materials and forms I want to explore further in my work.

EMDW: What are your points of reference for the works? They echo natural forms, botanical shapes, and of course they use natural materials. But they also show evidence of technology, in your use of industrial steel and synthetic artist's materials. Do you draw inspiration from specific sources, from concrete examples of objects in the world, or from culture?

LW: One of the things that has come up is mythology; ideas about myth, and personal fantasies about the world or the ways in which we see the world from our internalised perspectives. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard writes about the home being your first universe, your world, and everything you know happening in that space. It's your first experience of what a world is. Some things in my work hint at the domestic, such as the cork tiles and the cane. I was brought up in the 1980s, on the back of the 1970s. The cane also comes from that, and there's something interesting to me about the semi-exotic but very functional nature of materials found in the house.

I also love dance, though I have issues about how I might ever do some of the things

that dance can do, with my sculpture. Choreographers like Pina Bausch or Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker have done things and identified things with their work, and I don't know how I will ever be able to do that in my sculptures, but that's what I want to find. There's something about the way they show you a dynamic, and you can recognise something you know but have never seen before. There's something about having an unknown knowledge of a truth, which at the same time is a bit alien. So with my organic forms, some people see them as coral forms, others as plants, but I like the idea that they are a projection of my own, and you can take what you like from them. They are from my imagination, and without a specific place. They are informed by references that come into play but which are not necessarily for the viewer. I enjoy the fact that there is an uncertain line or an ambiguity in these objects. Which is not to say that the process of making them has not got a lot going into it; it has. But I don't need it to be there for the person looking at the works.

EMDW: There's a difference between producing a work with which you aim to access a universal facet of human experience, and creating a work that you need to make for your own reasons and in which other people might access that universal facet or language. I feel like you do the latter: the way you've made the works contains your own particular cosmology, manifested in a formal vocabulary which is all your own. Do you think about what this register of forms might be ahead of time, or is it simply an intuitive process?

LW: Intuition is important, but it doesn't exist without an awful lot of moving and changing. People see things in my work, and I'm often surprised by what they see, though I'm never offended by it. I am drawn to the qualities, longevity and lifespan of materials, as well as their fragility and temporary nature. I like the contrast between those two realities.

The steel structures in some of my sculptures act as permanent supports, whereas the clay shapes I position on top of them act as temporary forms that inhabit them. It's clear that the steel will outlive the clay, whether you consciously think of it or not. Without doing anything more, I've set up a relationship for the viewer to think about.

EMDW: You've mentioned that you prize the imperfections in your works, for example when a net you have woven out of clay cracks or when there is an irregularity in a particular pattern. Can you talk about why you think this is an interesting phenomenon, aesthetically?

LW: One of the reasons I love the faults in my clay works, the cracks or breakages, is because they tell you something. I'm interested in mythology and ideas around fate and predestination. And weaving has a relationship with these ideas. In the woven clay pieces, you can see the fractures and I'm asking you to really look at them. You have to think about the fact that I wove the clay when it was raw, and then it has been fired. It's like the leaded windows in the gallery space: they have been made in a pattern like many windows in religious buildings, so that people can look, think and reflect or meditate on them. They still your mind a bit. What I like about the fractures in the piece is that because there is something wrong with it, you might spend more time with it and consider it. There's a whole history in that object.

EMDW: The flaws offer you an opportunity to notice the rest in a new way, they tell a story about how difficult it would have been to make it, and the struggles involved. Storytelling is such an inherent human need that, no matter how you tell it, whether in words or in an object, people will appreciate and possibly invest time and reflection in taking the story on board.

LW: Yes, and while I don't feel that I am a storyteller in

the sense that I don't expect someone to come into this room and find a narrative, process itself is a form of storytelling. It's also an exploration for me, a way of questioning things I do. The making is all about asking myself questions and trying to find answers in the process. The unfired clay works come from very simply taking the story of Achilles, who was dipped in the river Styx by his mother, who held him by the heel, and my interest in ideas of inheritance, continuation, protection, and human survival. And the way Achilles' mother held him upside down by the heel meant that part of him didn't touch the holy water, and was therefore his weak point. The idea of his skin being coated in a protected layer, and his mother's touch being ultimately what determines his fate was really interesting to me. So I started taking unfired clay sculptures I made and coating them in hot wax. Then with some of them, I allowed a gap between the wax and clay, and with others I left them completely coated. I put them all in the bath and the ones that were exposed let the water in, which started to wash away the clay, so there was a relationship between the skin-like wax and the absence of clay. These works led me on to working with unfired clay. It's an example of how an influence or reference like a myth might come through in my work: the unfired clay had a sense of being alive whereas the other one didn't, and I wanted to continue working with that idea. The things I am interested in come through in my finished work in ways that become evident on reflection. But it's not about illustrating a mythology; it's about collecting large amounts of information and things, and reaching a point where I have to separate things out, like de-coupling a train. Finally there's a point where I have to let go, something that's really necessary when working with materials like clay and plaster, and just let it happen, but with the knowledge that ultimately it all feeds back in to the work.



Artist's presentation

Lucy Whitford
Saturday 9 February, 3pm

Zabludowicz Collection Invites is dedicated to presenting UK-based artists who do not currently have representation by a commercial gallery. Taking the form of solo presentations, exhibitions will result from an open-ended invitation to exhibit new work.

Reverse:
Lucy Whitford, *A treasured kind of wild* (2012)

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