



Hazel Brill interviewed
by curator Paul Luckraft,
13 February 2018



Paul Luckraft: Over the past few years you've developed a distinctive approach to combining video with sculptural objects in space – the video almost performs in a theatrical sense. What is it about this format that feels exciting to work with?

Hazel Brill: I like the idea of the video performing. I have recently wanted my work to feel like a small, awkward show, playing on loop. The objects are a consistent presence, obediently fulfilling their duty as props and actors, depending on the script. In general I have an initial urge to make things physical to satisfy some frustrations with the constraints of a flat screen, but it's actually more of an interest in the transformative qualities the objects and videos have over each other, and the opportunity to use these relationships as a base format for storytelling. It's to do with the presence of physical objects in a room, looking at you; an energy that can't be replicated digitally. I hate documentation of my installation. Without the liveness it feels horrible, unhinging. The installations do reference theatre, but also I am thinking about animation and the medium's ability for metamorphosis. Learning the very basics of animation, in particular computer-generated imagery, altered the way I saw space and influenced my ideas for these installations.

PL: The new video installation features several protagonists, both human and non-human. Can you talk a bit about them?

HB: They feel quite ambivalent in a way, like they are performing a recital. Without a clear hierarchy between them they move from being a protagonist to just a motif – a prop, a reference, a feeling. The characters include an animated narcissus who is an insomniac and reluctant to wake; a Heston Blumenthal lookalike stilt-walking events performer; a nihilistic tulip that blooms post-climax; two narrators; a bored kettle; and some other things. In a way, they are all vessels

to think through. It makes the space weirdly personified and saturated in voices. I'm really interested in the narrative structures and characters that emerge from kids' TV programmes, which have the aim of engaging children in pre-verbal or developing language. A kind of syntax materialises between objects, characters and words, each element serving different functions throughout. I want to play with structure and sense-making in a similar way.

PL: What key themes or flavours have inspired the scripting of this new piece? In our previous conversations you've mentioned the idea of cycles of growth and decay or 'boom and bust', both natural and made by humans.

HB: I don't think of the script as having key themes, particularly, but I like the idea of flavours inspiring the work, because it does feel like a process of developing a taste for things which then gains sensitivity and branches off into areas that are more vibrant. Sometimes 'tastes' for things are acquired unintentionally; at the moment the language of finance is infiltrating my writing as I've been doing a temp job in a finance department and have accidentally fallen into the social media algorithmic bubble of cryptocurrencies. I began to think about financial investments being emotional acts, their processes similar to the attachments and losses of a romantic relationship.

Going back to your question, yes, I was thinking about shared patterns – for example, the 'boom and bust' structure of my epileptic fits, the gains and losses of a caffeine crash – and the predictability of climactic cycles of peaks and troughs. There is a moment in the narrative where a great-grandmother references tulip mania; later on there are references to fat clogging a sewage drain. I was thinking about a human centipede kind of generational dysfunction – passing down habits, making change difficult. Bringing it

back to natural, seasonal cycles helps me resist the temptation of externalising pessimism through the work too much.

PL: Do you hope that a viewer of your work will make sense of it – or do you deliberately overload your work with interconnecting strands?

HB: I don't mind too much. I hope that there is enough structure and meat to grab hold of so viewers are not left cold; I want feelings and heat to be transferred. I like it if the viewer makes their own kind of sense of the work – in the way that a poem or Teletubbies programme might mean something to an individual. It's not a deliberate overload to confuse anyone, but more the process of making and thinking through ideas laid a bit bare. I want to display the interconnecting strands and mess that make up a compartmentalised idea.

Also, I'm interested in a type of understanding that considers the absurd. Talking about the interconnectedness and texture of things potentially creates fertile ground for nuance. I think that political rhetoric, buzzwords and binary debate often close ideas down, stifling the possibility for change. Clickbait capitalism feeds this; there is always a desire in my work for unlearning these sort of structural earworms.

PL: Scale seems an important aspect you play with.

HB: Yes, I use scale in installations to create a sense of distance, an adjustment in the size of an object – to make the set feel like a landscape, for example. I've also been making some miniature sets to film recently – for me, they share similar escapist properties to animation, where you can create small worlds and enter them. It is also a good solution to the lack of space in London.

PL: Is this the first time you've worked and directed live-action performers? If so, what new discoveries or directions has the process has thrown up?

HB: I have worked with actors a couple of times before – my work is usually partially directed but involves improvisation. I always have big ideas for these shoots but only end up using small parts when it comes to the edit. I'm not sure yet if this is a failure. During the shoot, the intimacy and conversation are great and inspire the script, but it's also uncomfortable; I feel intrusive, voyeuristic. It always comes back to control. In this instance I was filming a man who was older and stronger than me – twice my height when wearing his stilts. But in front of the camera he's very vulnerable. It made me think a lot about the treatment of women by directors like David Lynch, who has free rein to recreate his 'dreams', and about the power dynamics that occur when they are executed.

PL: Your recent work often seems to circle around ideas of role-playing and how people present themselves in different contexts. Is the idea of fakery and pretence interesting to you?

HB: I'm less interested in fakery – the term feels indistinct now, and without weight. I'm more interested in the desire to embody other characters and people, and to be possessed by them. In this case the Heston Blumenthal lookalike decided to capitalise on his vague similarity to a celebrity chef. Multiple fictions layer on top of one another here: Kate Bush embodies Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, and singers who cover the song embody both Kate Bush and Cathy. There is something melancholic about these strings of embodiments, made up of layered identities, but also something special and joyous. It goes back to an interest in storytelling.

PL: Can you talk a bit about how you use sound and music to set the pace and tone of a composition?

HB: They're handled in the same way as the other media are used – layered on top of one another, their specificities building a narrative together.

However, I suppose music is the most potent and powerful, and I exploit that to get at a feeling more urgently. It lets you push and pull, seduce and repel.

PL: You've made works for theatre spaces and public spaces in buildings before. Have these felt like successful excursions, or is the gallery space going to be your main focus going forward?

HB: They have definitely been interesting excursions, and I like the fact they reach more people, not just art audiences. Galleries can sometimes be alienating or exclusive. However, maybe people don't want art in their face. I'm slightly concerned about imposing my art upon people, uncontained.

Reverse: *Woke Up in Spring*, 2018 (production still).
Courtesy the artist.

Artist's presentation Sunday 8 April, 3pm. Free.
Please see website for further details.

Hazel Brill (b. 1991, London) studied MFA Fine Art Media, Slade School of Art, UCL London (2015–2017) and BA Hons Fine Art at Newcastle University (2010–2014). Recent exhibitions include *Artagon III*, Paris (2017), *Ident*, East Bristol Contemporary (2017), *Workplace*, Workplace Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne (2017), *In Succession*, Museum of London (2016–2017), *Sails Pitch*, Platform 1, Bloomsbury Theatre, London (2016), *In Bardo; Act Two* (part of Baltic 39, Figure 2), Baltic 39, Newcastle upon Tyne (2014).

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