



Rebecca Ackroyd interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 29 August 2017

Paul Luckraft: What is *The Root* of the show title, and how does it relate to the pieces you've made?

Rebecca Ackroyd: I was thinking about a starting point, of an idea, or of a life, and then the growth of that idea into something you can't predict. With what's happening politically in the world, I was also thinking about the root of problems. Where has the situation we are in now erupted from, and where is it going?

PL: There are also the organic and plant connotations.

RA: Maybe I first got the idea when I was talking to my mum – we'd been away, and she said she was enthused about getting back into the garden, and that she'd had so many ideas for it. I can't say I've felt that way myself as I've never had a garden! But I was drawn to the sense of a place of growth for an idea, but one you're not in control of. You're planting it and seeing what happens.

PL: Here, and in recent shows, it seems to me that you're exploring a process of both revealing and concealing things. Would you agree?

RA: Yes. I wanted the black felt works in my solo show at OUTPOST, Norwich, to be like shadows of memories that emerged in the space. They were recollections of parts of my parents' house, parts of my experience of the world, and my place in it, and it was important that they were revealed as you walked through the gallery. The new *Carrier* works are more direct, especially with the photographic imagery. They are modes in which I am able to be quite specific, pasting and layering content onto the surface. The images reflect what's happening in the world, but also include personal photos. It's an eclectic summary of what I know, somehow. I've always made work that teeters between things, hinting at things without explicitly saying them. I'm interested in the linger rather than the instant.

PL: Is the use of photography in your installations a new thing? And where do the images come from?

RA: I've often used these sorts of images as reference material in the studio but they've never made it into the work. Rather than being dropped, they are now getting pushed into the pieces. They are a mixture of pictures I've found and ones I have taken myself. I want them to be reflective of the time we are in now. But they are all printed in black and white, and I wanted this flat layering where different images are compressed together with none shouting over the other. Their blankness is what I was really interested in. I wanted a certain absorption of light. The *Carrier* sculptures are minimal, but are also reflective of urban spaces.

PL: Across your work there is often a relationship between the corporeal and architecture. Could you tell me about this interest in body and building?

RA: What I immediately think of is my interest in escaping or transcending the space I am in, while not ignoring the nature of a space. Scale is vital, and I think about the body of the viewer being confronted by something I have made. I enjoy testing the limits of a space and making it my own. The OUTPOST show was the most theatrical I have done, in terms of making changes to the gallery space with the carpet and the lighting. Previously I've always let my sculptural objects do the transformational work without adjusting the room they are presented in. I really wanted to put the viewer in a different space than a gallery. I'm interested in a bit of discomfort, with people feeling unsure what they are supposed to be looking at.

PL: Is the range of scale in your work, from the large room interventions to small, subtle details, part of this desire to keep viewers on their toes?

RA: Scale is another way of shifting what you know and what you are familiar

with. Especially with my limb sculptures with the vents in: these speak of a massive industrial or mechanical scale. I wanted them to be like remnants; leftovers from something that no longer functions. They merge into the architecture.

PL: Another aspect that has become more prominent in your recent shows is elements of autobiography, or at least mining your own memories for motifs. Is the patterned carpet in this show an example of this?

RA: It's perhaps more related to an idea of British identity, which is something I've been thinking about a lot, for probably the first time in my life – both what I like about it and what I don't. The idea of the carpet came from my interest in shifting the feel of a space. It's pub-like, but also floral, traditional and domestic. It does seem quite masculine, though, suggesting a drinking culture. I've never thought of myself as being a 'British artist', and most of the artists I'm interested in come from a German tradition. But in the current political climate it feels a pertinent thing to address. I don't see the carpet as becoming a formula for how I deal with space, however; it's just that it feels right at the moment. At OUTPOST I wanted the objects that sat on the carpet to feel like they were sinking into it, with nothing jumping out. These were objects that reflected memories of mine, becoming absorbed into a dominant culture. You can't escape it, even if you want to. And actually there's a fondness for British culture too.

PL: Is making the works a way of thinking through these mixed emotions?

RA: Yes, it's about working out my place, both in my practice and in the world more generally. We can't choose our circumstances, and many things are beyond our control. All my work over the past year has come out of a feeling of frustration and helplessness. I didn't want to carry on like nothing was happening and

continue to make similar-looking works. I felt a responsibility to try to engage with what's happening politically, which is something I've always been interested in. Not only gender politics, but a bigger conversation. It's always about locating yourself more broadly.

PL: Do you think the gallery space, and contemporary art generally, is a productive arena in which to deal with politics?

RA: It depends; it's a real challenge. If you try to make work about one political idea, the results can be quite literal and illustrative. This directness can be effective too, of course. Gee Vaucher's image *Oh America* springs to mind as an evocatively powerful one, especially recontextualised in the Trump era. I'm fascinated by the balance between saying something and not – how your actions, through making art, can speak of the time in which they are made. For me it is about thinking about my place and location and how this creates a context for what I make, even if that's subconscious to a degree. I've just read the book *An Artist of the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro. It's written through the eyes of an artist in post-World War II Japan. It's the artist contending with his guilt, because he was part of the effort to boost Japan through propaganda. It traces his life and reflects the rejection by a younger generation of these older patriotic ideals. But it's also about the lack of power he had as an artist: he wasn't making the decisions but, just making art for a regime, and it was circumstances that put him on the wrong side of history. It's really beautiful and simple in a way, despite dealing with such complexity.

PL: Returning to the idea of visual rather than literary complexity, which artists are the key touchstones for you? You mentioned earlier that certain German artists are central inspirations.

RA: Yes, people like Martin Kippenberger, Rosemarie

Trockel, Isa Genzken, Jana Euler and Kai Althoff. It's more a question of attitude: doing your own thing and not worrying if it doesn't fit in or look too much like contemporary art. When I think about some of my own recent works it's quite weird, because I really don't see them as sculptures, more like just things I made. That's probably true about most of my work – I try not to label it as Art, more like notes of ideas.

Reverse: *Carrier*, 2017 (detail). Photo by Ben Westoby. Courtesy the artist.



Artist's presentation Sunday 22 October, 3pm, free. Delving further into her interest in specific architectures, Ackroyd invites a specialist to map a spiritual history of the building, revealing its inherent memories.

Rebecca Ackroyd (b. 1987, Cheltenham, UK) lives and works in London. She graduated from the Royal Academy Schools in 2015, and completed a BA in Fine Art at Byam Shaw School of Art in 2010. Ackroyd has presented solo exhibitions at Galerie Opdahl, Stavanger, Norway (2017), OUTPOST, Norwich (2017) and in London at Hunter/Whitfield (2015). Group exhibitions in 2015–17 include: *On Cold Spring Lane*, Assembly Point, London; *These Rotten Words*, Chapter, Cardiff; *Walled Gardens in an Insane Eden*, Z2O Sara Zanin Gallery, Rome; *Modest Villa Immense Versailles* (co-curator), Kinman Gallery, London; *Bloody Life*, Herald St, London; *All Over*, Studio Leigh, London; *With institutions like these*, Averard Hotel, London; *The London Open*, Whitechapel Gallery, London.

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