



Laurence Owen interviewed
by curator Paul Luckraft,
11 December 2019

Paul Luckraft: Over the last couple of years, your work has shifted from separate pieces in painting and ceramics towards hybrid objects. How did that shift come about?

Laurence Owen: I wanted to create an environment where the body was navigated in some way, where the viewer became a partaker of something sculpturally experiential, but where the work was still operating from the position of painting – almost in the way that the assemblages of Rauschenberg or Stella move into notions of materiality when they're at their most sculptural, but they are still deemed paintings. Some elements in my work come out into the volumetric realm of the viewer. They live outside their own frame while simultaneously existing within a framework. The forms themselves are derived from quite a literal extrapolation process of 'stuff' from the physical world, before it's filtered, reorganised and sent back out.

PL: It sounds like you're thinking about how to give an honest response to how things are unavoidably interlinked in the way we experience them in the world.

LO: Totally. I'm responding to a certain awareness of the things that form our understanding of 'the world': we all have an individual experience of it, but we also collectively exist within constructed frameworks. Obviously this includes art. And this framework evolves. Using a mixture of densities and weights – like fired earth, wood and sand – from 'out in the world' and reorganising them leads to other possibilities of what an *experience* of these things might be. To me, making art allows me creative access to questions about the fixed definitions by which we live. It seems to me that we have logic, and we retain the idea that there are substances in the world that have properties. I try to investigate the notion that this can be abstracted from the everyday experience of our perception of objects.

When I make a piece of work, *perception* takes priority over logic and theory. In this way, perception can be the basis of conception. So it cyclically feeds back in.

PL: Over the course of your studies, did you feel that the definitions between design, craft, architecture and fine art were very rigid and separate, or do you think that contemporary art has long been a really open field?

LO: I think it's a very open field. Across temporalities it can incorporate and merge with other domains that have rigid definitions and strict borders. It is open to interpretation too. In a very basic sense, it's reflective of the way we walk through any environment and ingest signifiers from it, depending on what we consciously choose to absorb.

PL: Am I right in thinking that your work is not necessarily about reaching a full harmony among different elements, but that you want to retain an awkwardness as things butt up against one another?

LO: Yeah – I'm not into flattening out these differences. It's like taking one preordained thing that is defined, labelled and categorised with a role, and putting it next to another thing. The resulting hybridisation offers up a different thing, where its initial label isn't acting as 'that' any more. In this process, linguistic definitions stop foregrounding our relationship with what we know – instead it becomes an experiential interaction.

PL: One of the most intriguing things about your practice is that it asserts that the art object communicates beyond a language system. Living, as we do, in a time that prioritises quick definitions, holding attention via an object could be seen as a challenge.

LO: Absolutely. Culturally speaking, I think indeterminacy and not knowing are kind of unbearable today. I think art objects can be an experiential

interaction or a metaphysical engagement with something that isn't delegated to literary linguistic formulae. Even this interview text performs a function born out of the need to get 'the full picture'. And this doesn't have to apply; art can perform many duties. It doesn't have to have just one 'total explanation', as we have been conditioned to expect. I think that art objects can resonate in a place of deep time – something that we all recognise innately but perhaps cannot verbally express. In today's flattened-out, quick-click culture, we seem to be moving away from a meditation on this kind of 'other language'.

PL: Do your pieces relate to the fractured or reassembled human form, or are they more inspired by other types of organic form? This leads on to a question about the place of humans in the natural world. What are your views on propositions such as animism, which attributes souls to plants and inanimate objects, for example?

LO: In terms of making my forms feel directly anatomical, I hadn't thought of it that way. It's actually more a result of the practicalities of making an object by hand in the studio. But I do agree that bodily metaphors filter into it. Regarding your question on our place in the natural world, I think there's been a huge shift in our interactions with natural organisms and the systems surrounding us. I'm inspired by certain organic forms and by hybridising these with man-made infrastructure. On a collective level, I think we simulate our own version of connectivity through grid systems applied in micro- or macro-scales, from an electronic circuit in a computer chip to the road network of New York City. This pattern seems to be our universal linkage. It can be seen in various places, from the art of Agnes Martin and Mondrian to manufacturing infrastructure. We are objective observers of it, while unconsciously inhabiting it. I sometimes draw a parallel between human grid systems and fungal networks

by considering the similarities in our need to connect and communicate. It seems we're biologically pre-programmed to acquire 'wholeness' by a collective acknowledgement of coexistence.

PL: You could argue that humans have only lost their 'connection' with nature for a very short window in the larger framework of time. For millennia, different cultures around the world have invented ways of listening to the networks you describe.

LO: We've never really been able to divorce ourselves from our fascination with the natural world, and a desire for exaggerated versions of it – but on our own terms. In Japan there's a 500-year-old bonsai tree called the Whirlpool. It's been fashioned to look as if the weather has bent it into a swirl. And it's still alive. It's the same age as Michelangelo's *David*, but it's a living, breathing organism/sculpture. I find it really interesting that, ever since the Enlightenment, nature has been tamed and mastered by humankind. It has been used as the backdrop and resource for the moral intentionality of Man: we consider the future as possessing a singular direction, building our own progress story, not thinking about the world around us except in how it will benefit our progress.

PL: There's an interesting recent article by Robert McFarlane [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/nov/02/trees-have-rights-too-robort-macfarlane-on-the-new-laws-of-nature>] that looks at examples from around the world of people lobbying for trees, rivers and mountains to be assigned the same legal rights as humans. It opens up a set of ethical questions. Once you start to go down that route, does it then diminish the special and unique quality of human life?

LO: That's fascinating. But why should we expect fungi and plants, etc., to behave as humans behave, as commodifiable, economical contributors creating a language that enhances business progress?

I think you have to go *beyond* the legal rights and economic costs when thinking about 'other life'. It's a new language altogether – one that doesn't just automatically convert it into our own values. McFarlane also said something about how our grammar militates against animacy: our metaphors, by habit and reflex, subordinate and anthropomorphise the more-than-human world. We need another language: let's learn to 'Speak in spores!', as Merlin Sheldrake says. [<https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-secrets-of-the-wood-wide-web>]

PL: Alongside our Invites show, you are also presenting a parallel show at Lychee One in east London. Are the two groups of works similar?

LO: They are quite different. The works are larger here in the Invites room. But in both spaces I want the forms to undulate, flow and curve, soliciting notions of a redundant functionality. I've always been interested in artworks that appear to cross temporalities. For this show I made pieces that nod to artefacts anchored in a sort of placelessness. The works at Lychee One are paintings imbued with ceramics; here in the Invites room, the painting is eaten by the form.

PL: The title of the show, *Gerund*, is a grammatical term relating to the shifting nature of things...

LO: Yes, a gerund is a verb that acts as a noun. It's what happens when you tack '-ing' on to a word like 'swim' to make 'swimming'. When you apply one area of language and combine it with another to make an experiential definition, this requires a hybridisation between verb/noun/adverb. These territories flood into each other, redefining themselves and one another, and in turn becoming their own things.

Reverse: *Subterrane*, 2019. Glazed ceramic, sand, oil, card, canvas on board

Artist's presentation: Sunday 16 February, 3pm. Free
Please check website for further details.

Laurence Owen (b. Gloucester 1984, lives and works in London) completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art at Royal Academy Schools, London in 2015, and holds a BA (Hons) in Fine Art from Falmouth College of Art, Cornwall. Recent solo exhibitions include those at Galerie PCP, Paris (2018) Evelyn Yard, London (2016). Group exhibitions include *Mushrooms: The art, design and future of fungi*, Somerset House, London (upcoming 2020), *Drawing Biennial 2019*, Drawing Room, London (2019), *Something Else*, Triumph Gallery, Moscow (2018), *Absent Bodies*, OSL Contemporary, Oslo (2017) and *John Moores Painting Prize*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, (2016).

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