Julia Crabtree & William Evans

slip

17 September 2021 - 16 January 2022
Julia Crabtree and William Evans have been collaborating since 2006 and are known for their process-driven sculpture. Their work incorporates a breadth of materials and modes of making from casting and glass-blowing to video-making and printing. For each new body of work they initiate a sequence of contained sculptural experiments. The artists allow the fallibilities of collaborative working and the risk of failure inherent to their materials to inform the final object. *Slip* includes work from the last five years alongside sculptures made for this exhibition.

The need to touch and understand the world through its things, when most information arrives via screens, underpins Crabtree and Evans’ experimental and playful approach. Entering this exhibition requires walking upon the carpet of *Gullet* 2016–21. The printed image comes from a simulation of a smoke-filled room, now stripped of its digital slickness and transferred onto a malleable, physical surface. Acting as a threshold to the exhibition, the part-sculpture, part-pedestal also reveals the duo’s interest in scenography and the collision of real and digital experience.

Embracing the ‘errors’ and ‘mishaps’ of their working processes, along with off-kilter colours, Crabtree and Evans seek an alternative to recognised systems of perfection, taste and the myth of the artist genius. In a new body of ceramics, which appropriate mass-produced goods designed to support the body, the cracks and collapses triggered by casting, firing and glazing have all been retained. In another new series, blown glass sculptures are pushed to their material limits with extreme heat, gravity and the artists’ own collaborative decision-making central to their process.

In the video installation *Crutch* 2017–21, a projection shows bodily indentations being made by an invisible force into a soft, tactile base. Whatever their chosen material, Crabtree and Evans’ works speak of the body without ever depicting it. Interested in systems and ecologies, the exhibition as a whole offers a landscape of ecosystems which, as they say themselves, ‘is exactly what the body is’.

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**LIST OF WORKS**

1. *Gullet* 2016–21
   Carpet, uranium glass, jesmonite, sausage casing, rebar, wool, cotton twill, dye, buttermilk, pond life, porcelain, paper pulp, memory foam, glass
   With work commissioned by the Walter Phillips Gallery at Banff Centre and Cell Project Space

2. *Swell* 2018
   Glass, water, rebar, pond life, jesmonite, sausage casing

3. *Heaves* 2021
   Glass, water

4. *Pores* 2021
   Slip cast earthenware, glaze

5. *Crutch* 2017–21
   Multi-channel video installation (colour, sound, 7.39min looped)
   Original version commissioned by Focal Point Gallery

6. The artists have requested that the front of the gallery is not weeded for the duration of the exhibition 2021
Julia Crabtree & William Evans in conversation with Laurence Sillars

Your sculptures are always the result of your collaboration. What impact does working together have on your process and the end result?

Our work is developed through conversation and experimentation with different materials and processes. We move forward with the elements that we both find interesting, so our collaboration aids editing and directs our enquiry. We’re also often drawn to processes that require two people. We’re interested in the way collaboration can challenge the myth of the artist genius and, by extension, the systems and structures of power that uphold that myth.

The work we end up showing is the product of compromise, of what we both agree on, although sometimes for different reasons. Collaborating allows a relinquishing of control, opening up work to misunderstandings and mistranslations. We’re both dyslexic, so between us, verbal/linguistic communication is prone to errors and mishaps. The gesture and physical materials and placements of objects is another way for us to try to explain things to each other, although this too is prone to error.

Errors, or mishaps, are important and your materials and processes have them ‘baked-in’. What draws you to this unpredictability?

We want to remove the pressure and implications of ‘success’ or ‘perfection’. We’re interested in what systems and structures of power these values tie us to – the forces that only prescribe value to things that are perceived to be ‘skilled’ and without ‘flaws’ – and in considering the damage they’ve done to the world. We’re also interested in how anti-professionalism and low-fi making challenge this problematic. We try to think through alternative, more open approaches to making.

Do you set yourselves rules when fabricating new work?
There aren’t necessarily any that we set ourselves to begin with, but rules begin
to reveal themselves through material properties and processes. Glass and ceramics
have some very set conditions in order to be able to survive the extreme ranges
of temperature needed to work with them. To an extent, rules can happen with
exhibitions too. With Gullet 2016–21, shown in the first gallery of the exhibition,
we never use nails or screws to install any of the works to give something height
artificially. Instead we use the different elements themselves to hold each other up
and create precarious balances and supports and develop interdependencies
and entanglements.

You’re using a number of processes and materials for the first time to make
sculptures for this exhibition. Could you describe some of them?
There’s often a new material or process that we’re drawn to or curious to understand.
We approach projects with different ideas and references that we want to emerge in
the final work. We’ve been working with clay – it’s such a versatile and rich material.
We’re also working with slip casting (an industrial process), particularly in relation
to sanitary ware, and forms created in response to the body and its processes.
We were thinking through the history of slip casting, this industrial process and its
contemporary applications, in parallel to clay’s extensive history and its grounding
as mud. We also like the material relationship between slip and plaster. States
of matter are proving especially important: liquid to solid, transformation, and how
the plaster encourages the slip to form a skin or shell.

We’ve also become interested in the process of casting itself – its nature requires so
much contact and intimate exchange. We’re working with a kiln and thinking of it as
a tool in its own right. Clay and glass are first ports of call for this, but it has opened
up interesting questions about putting materials under extreme heat and how high
temperatures might encourage a material transformation. We enjoy that some of this
also requires our collaboration with highly skilled makers.

You’ve begun working with glazing too…
Glazing presented itself as a logical continuation for the slip casting as part of the
ceramics process, its reference to sanitary ware and the connections it makes with
our glass work. Through glazing, the earthenware forms become vessels – they
are no longer porous and can hold liquid. We’ve worked with very simple glazes,
We affect and are affected by each other, we share the same air, we breathe each other’s breath, we are entangled with each other.

but as a ceramic process it’s exciting to begin playing with them as they create unpredictable results: there’s an alchemy that happens in the kiln. It has also presented technical issues that we hadn’t foreseen – fractures and tears that we’d welcomed in the production process made some of the forms too fragile to survive the glazing process. The porous nature of the bisque fired clay does open the objects up to different material processes that we plan to explore going forward. This exhibition is like a frozen moment within that material enquiry.

How significant is colour to your work, and what informs your choices?
For us, colour encourages play. It also disrupts systems of value and ideas of good taste which are inherently tied to class, hierarchies and systems of power. We’re interested in ideas of ‘silly’ colours, of colour that may be dismissed, or colour that might undermine the authority of an otherwise minimalist gesture.

For some, colour can be considered surface or superficial, but in many material processes it comes from elements. For example, we were partly drawn to the yellow of the uranium glass as it reminded us of urine. The uranium not only gives it colour but brings other material and conceptual properties too.

With the ceramic works we’ve been making we were interested in trying to create insipid colours, echoing the sagging, cracking and buckling of the clay bodies themselves; glazes that were alluring through their shine but were muted, gesturing towards bathrooms and mass-produced ceramic sanitary wares like toilets.

How do you control risk?
Control isn’t something we’re necessarily after. Trying to undo or relinquish a need to control things interests us. We often start from a place of openness or unknowing when it comes to working with materials. We learn from our mistakes, or pieces


might develop from the waste product of a process or a misunderstanding of how to work with something. An exhibition then becomes an accumulation of tests and experiments, including errors, mistakes and breakages. We’re not working to a final conclusive image of a show, rather we’re accumulating objects and forms, some of which even evidence the limitation of a material (or our ability to work with it) at that given moment. We’re also interested in whether a material or process can influence or create a form. Where can the material lead the creation of a work? In parallel to this we try to find forms that can be drawn from our independent research that somehow bring together multiple areas of interest.

The body is ever present in your work, alluded to but never represented: the titles, the forms, even the making processes and their inherent vulnerabilities. The installation of the exhibition at times feels like the body too. We’re interested in thinking through notions of inside and outside in relation to the spaces we inhabit, in the world and our own bodies. Topologically, in many ways the body is a torus – the gut is a hole that passes through it from the mouth to the anus: its surface is a continuation of our skin and therefore a surface in contact with the external world. Thinking through these fluctuations between inside and outside exposes how constructed binaries might blur and dissolve. We’re interested in how to shift perspectives to reflect on a larger entanglement of bodies, of being and matter and how we affect and connect with each other.

Those concerns take on new levels of significance during a global pandemic of course... We think the pandemic exposed the fallacy in many existing ideologies and systems. The idea of the bounded neo-liberal subject – an individual who exists independently without consideration or accountability to others – is a delusion, and a dangerous one at that. We affect and are affected by each other, we share the same air, we breathe each other’s breath, we are entangled with each other and the world and the other creatures and bodies in the world – and that is exactly how the virus spread. And when we were encouraged to act like neo-liberal subjects, to ‘Eat Out to Help Out’, to prioritise the health of the economy over the health of each other, the virus spread further.

Our bodies are not even singular, they are ecosystems made up of more bacteria cells than human cells. We are entangled with human and non-human bodies, with plants, machines, animals, mycelium, bacteria and so on.

Another of the many impacts of Covid-19 has been the loss of touch – of each other, of surfaces, of so much that connects us to the world. The haptic feels very important in your work. We’re interested in the things we touch, the surfaces that we share. How are we affecting each other? What are our needs and how can we shift to a politics of care? As opposed to trying to dominate, master or control, what are the other relations we can have with things, each other and the world? With Gullet 2016, the viewer becomes implicit by needing to stand on the work to view it. The image printed on the carpet is rendered from a virtual simulation of particles in a room, a moment frozen in time on a screen. Its previous existence as a digital image that allowed a distanced, detached overview has been stripped away. It opens the exhibition here like a threshold, so is unavoidable. Visitors will have to touch it and become part of its surface.

So much comes to us through images and the screen, which prioritises seeing well above our other senses and seems to enable a distanced viewing that lets us believe we are somehow removed or not complicit in what we’re seeing. For us, touch reiterates our connections. We also want our work to feel like a landscape, a terrain, an ecosystem – which, after all, is exactly what the body is.

Laurence Sillars is the Head of the Henry Moore Institute.

Gullet 2016–21 (installation view)
Commissioned by Walter Phillips Gallery, at Banff Centre and Cell Project Space.
ABOUT THE ARTISTS
Julia Crabtree and William Evans were the recipients of the Nina Stewart Residency award at South London Gallery, the Mary E. Hofstetter Legacy Scholarship for the New Materiality residency at the Banff Centre, Canada and are Wysing Arts Centre residency alumni. They are currently working on a garden commission for Flat-Time House with Alice Hattrick. Recent commissions include Gulch, exhibited at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff and Crutch shown as part of Maximum Overdrive at Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea. Solo exhibitions include Cell Project Space, London, South London Gallery and Legion TV, London.

henry-moore.org/crabtree-evans

ONLINE EXHIBITION EVENTS
A series of free online research events accompanies the exhibition, exploring a variety of themes related to Julia Crabtree and William Evans’ practice.

IN CONVERSATION: ART AND ECOLOGY
with Angela Chan (Creative Climate Change Communicator) and Rachel Pimm (artist)
Wednesday 3 November 2021
6pm

LECTURE
Dr Laura U. Marks (Simon Fraser University)
Wednesday 1 December 2021
6pm

READINGS
with writers Alice Hattrick, Daisy Hildyard and Daisy Lafarge
Wednesday 12 January 2022
6pm

Book your place at henry-moore.org/slip-events

The artists would like to thank: Arts Council England; Banff Centre; Jacqueline Bell, Cell Project Space; Eliot Crabtree; Focal Point Gallery; Alice Hattrick; the Henry Moore Institute; Joe Hill; Nick Jones; Donna Lynas; Kaiki Mansel; Milika Muritu; National Glass Centre, Sunderland; Lotte Juul Petersen; Peta Rake; James Ravinet; Borbala Soos; Walter Phillips Gallery; Tom Wandrag; Wysing Arts Centre.

RIGHT Julia Crabtree & William Evans,
Original version commissioned by Focal Point Gallery.
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