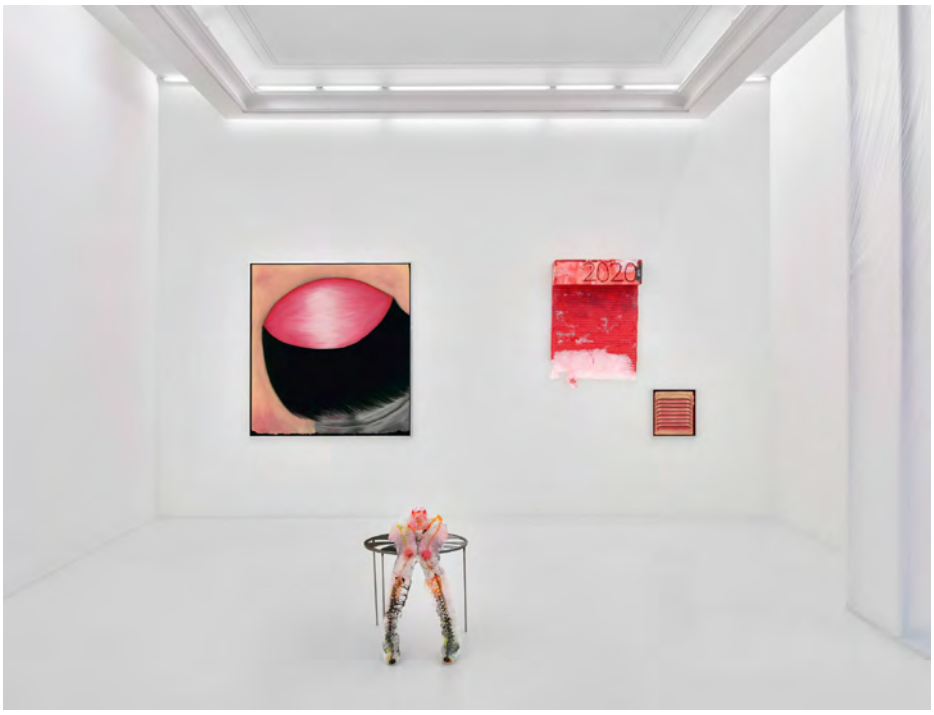
sculpture



Specific Ideas: A Conversation with Rebecca Ackroyd

November 4, 2021 by Thomas Ellmer

Since graduating from the Royal Academy in 2015, Rebecca Ackroyd has emerged as one of the most exciting artists in the U.K. Working across sculpture, drawing, and painting, she creates installations that bring together the body, architecture, and sexuality in nightmarish and uncanny ways, excavating memory and history to confront the viewer with new notions of femininity and power. Ackroyd's most recent investigations, exploring her unconscious dreams, were recently shown in "100mph," her second solo exhibition at Peres Projects in Berlin.

Thomas Ellmer: I first came across your work at your Royal Academy degree show. A crowd of oversize, androgynous, and alien-like legs in plaster-white stood at the center of your exhibition space, greeting visitors. Thinking back to this time, are there any particular moments that stand out as being formative experiences?

Rebecca Ackroyd: I think the whole show was very formative for me. It was the first time that I really thought about using a space to help articulate what the works could be and how their relationship to one another could build content and context. I think a lot of the same ideas are still prevalent in my work, and the dialogue between figurative and more abstract elements is also still there—especially in the most recent work.

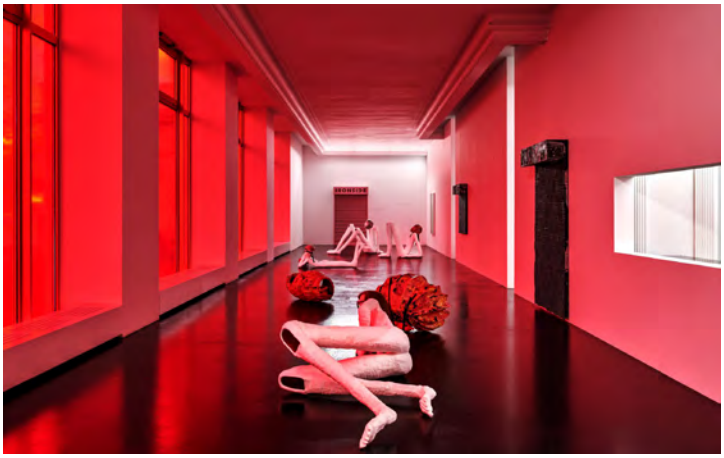
TE: What were your first moves as an artist after leaving the Royal Academy?

RA: The summer I left, my studio wasn't ready, and I had to move to my parents' house for two months to make a show. It was a strange and memorable experience having to fit sculptures around the laundry. I enlisted friends to come and help, with the offer of dinner and wine as payment; even my parents ended up helping. When my dad started giving tips on how to make the work better, it was time to leave. I moved back to London and worked from my studio in South Bermondsey.

TE: In two early exhibitions—"The Root," at the Zabludowicz Collection in London, and "House Fire," at Outpost Gallery in Norwich (both 2017)—your approach to exhibition-making became more focused on installation; for instance, you covered the floors of both

spaces with carpet. Where did this idea come from?
RA: The idea of installation was always important to me. I would consider how a viewer might encounter the works and make decisions based on the works in a particular space—whether it might be confrontational or chaotic. When installing a show of sculpture, the space becomes another form of articulation. The show at Outpost was an extension of this idea, perhaps a more literal one. It was the first time that I made an environment for the works, building a wall to change how you entered the space and dimming the lights.

The carpet is a motif I've repeated since then. It's similar to the type of carpets found in British pubs, and it alludes to an overbearing field of masculinity and pub culture. It's also symbolic of "Britishness" as an idea of lame patriotism that I felt inexplicably contaminated by after the Brexit vote. I went from never thinking about being British to having my nationality forcibly thrust upon me—it was suffocating. I wanted to explore those ideas and where I, as an individual, was within the broader fabric of society. It was then that I started to explore more personal narratives—for example, I used my mother's maiden name, Ironside, in a work for the first time. It has informed everything I've done since.



TE: Within your installations, you are mostly working in drawing or sculpture. When approaching these two mediums, do you think about them in symbiosis or as isolated processes?
RA: I always made drawings before starting a new body of work. It felt liberating to work in a way that was so immediate; ideas for new sculptures would develop through the drawings. I see them as quite separate, and for a long time, I found it hard to justify showing the drawings. The sculptures are usually led by a specific idea, and so the content is more apparent; whereas the drawings are much more psychological and free, so I don't always know what they're doing or how to talk about them. As I've gotten more confident in my practice, I don't really feel the need to justify my way of working. I think it's an art school hang-up to try and give reason to the minutiae of your working process, but now I'm more comfortable with not always knowing because it leads to the possibility of something surprising.

TE: Can you explain the "specific idea" that your sculptures derive from? Does this also inform your material choices?
RA: It really depends on the work, because they are all different. For instance, in one work, I appropriated a metal shutter by having my mother's maiden name laser cut at the top and then painted pink. I wanted that piece to directly reflect the idea of a name being erased through marriage and the passing on of a male lineage while the female name gradually disappears. By emblazoning it onto a shop shutter, it is absorbed into a ubiquitous visual history—like shops that come and go on a high street. The lettering remains as a marker of a previous time. It was a literal pasting of personal history onto a readymade, a thing owned by all. The materials are very much determined by how I want the work to feel; for example, in a recent series, I cast resin works in translucent colors because I wanted them to have a fragile, ghost-like quality.

TE: Your sculptures and drawings often combine architectural features and the body. Why is this relationship so vital to you?
RA: I like the idea that architecture retains a sense of its past occupants—if walls could speak. When buildings lie empty, they possess an unsettling quality that creeps into "haunted house" territory. I once had a shaman read the energy of one of my exhibitions; when I told her I felt a chill

down my spine, she informed me that there were the ghosts of a man and woman behind me. It was one of the most disconcerting experiences of my life and unnerved me for a few days afterwards, but at the same time, it fascinated me. What I'm getting at is the crossover between body and building—what remains and what decays, the combination of past and present.

TE: You mentioned the continuing presence of abstraction and figuration in your work. Does one take precedence?
RA: I don't think so. For me, it's more about changing the perspective of what you're looking at in order to create tension in the content. For example, I've magnified rips in tights to architectural scale to shift a sense of intimacy into a more overbearing visual experience. I also have moments of directness with figurative sculpture or drawing. I like the conflict between being specific and vague at the same time—a zooming in and out of what you're looking at, repeating a figurative gesture until it becomes abstract, or blowing up a pair of fishnets to become like a fence.

TE: In 2019, you presented the exhibition "Singed Lids" as part of the Lyon Biennale. It was an incredible, site-specific project, where the viewer stepped inside what felt like the carcass of a plane wreck, with limbs, seats, and suitcases rendered in translucent burnt oranges and reds. Could you explain the genesis of these works and how they responded to the space?
RA: The exhibition was housed in a disused factory on the outskirts of Lyon. The spaces were vast and industrial, which made it hard to envisage making something without it getting lost. The work emerged from the idea of an image being scorched onto a retina when you stare at a bright light and can still see the outline after you look away—an afterimage. This informed the color as well as the translucency. I wanted the works to appear as hot embers, like the remnants of a fire. Oddly, I wasn't thinking about a crash but a relic from a bygone time, with fragments of suitcases or flip-flops, a nod to leisure time. It seems all the weirder thinking about it now, after the Covid-19 lockdowns.

TE: You often used your London studio as a gallery/exhibition space, curating group exhibitions and solo shows by young artists working in the city. Why was this important to you, and is it something you hope to do in Berlin, where you've recently moved?
RA: I wanted to contribute in a different way to the art scene in London, and I had just finished a big body of work so I could clear my studio. It seemed like a better use of the space than just leaving it empty. The idea was that it could be a low-key testing ground for a project or a work. Now that I'm in Berlin, I'm already working on some ideas and thinking about applying for funding to pay for the shows and the artists. It's a balance, though—the shows have to fit around my schedule, which means there's no regularity to when they can happen.

PERES PROJECTS

TE: You recently had your second exhibition at Peres Projects. Did you approach this project, "100mph," differently?
RA: Yes, its tone is very different from "The Mulch," my first exhibition at Peres Projects, where I had a wall built all the way along the gallery to create a street or corridor. I also had red film fitted over the windows running the length of the gallery, to cast an intense, red-hot light into the space. The sculptures lazed in this heat with wax helmets or sunglasses shielding them from the light or whatever was beyond. I wanted the works to have an ominous confusion, perhaps reflecting a sense of chaos in myself but also a politically fraught time—of course, it's easy to say that with hindsight. I suppose the overall sense of the first exhibition was more apocalyptic.

The tone was altogether lighter in the second show. A lot of the development transpired from the first show, especially with regard to a personal sense of history or memory. "100mph" refers to an idea of mental restlessness, specifically at night. While the world ground to a halt, we collectively dreamed. When the doom of Covid-19 finally reached everyone, everything became much slower and quieter than we had perhaps imagined or experienced before. It was different than the sense of chaos one naturally associates with an apocalypse. I remember reading that preppers found the pandemic calming because the worst was already happening, the wait was over. I'm making it sound like that was what the show was about though, and it definitely wasn't.

TE: So, what were the key ideas behind "100mph?"
RA: At the core, there's an exploration of sexuality and vulnerability, as well as of memory, of trying to piece something back together. All the works are fragmented in one way or another like there's a bigger picture—the drawings have torn edges, the sculptures are broken or fractured, and the dream drawings have been torn out of a journal; they're all fragments of sentences in a bigger conversation. I liked the idea of a hazy recollection, like when you wake up and know you dreamed but can't quite remember what about, the occasional vivid image or conversation—the remnants of a drunken night out.

TE: The installation certainly felt like a dream or even a nightmare, with an airy quality fragmented by abject or disconcerting illustrations manifesting as sculptures and drawings. What were the most challenging aspects of configuring the space?
RA: I knew early in the conception of the show that I wanted to divide the space with semi-transparent walls, but the real challenge came with the install. I had no real plan of how the works might come together, and for me, that's often where a lot of the work is. I have the components, and it's the relationships I build between them that give an overall context or content—how I use and direct the space. For this show, it was a matter of trial and error until it started to come together. For a few days, it didn't seem to work until finally, it did. I don't really know how to describe that process, but it just started to sing, or scream.