

Caroline Achaintre, *Encounter L.*

Encounter L. includes the imposing woven sculpture Echo Peel which overlooks ESW's courtyard and a series of ceramic and metal works installed in ESW's North Lab. Achaintre's work brings together abstraction, figuration, humour and materiality, with the individual sculptures often becoming 'characters' which evoke their own narrative connections.

How do you approach this very particular invitation to make a sculpture for ESW's Courtyard?

CA: I looked at the context and tried to understand it but also took the approach to make something which was not reliant on any one element of the design or architecture around it, but which could be an entity of its own. The environment meant that I needed to work in a way which could amplify my ideas but it was very important to me to retain a vulnerability in the work.

The vulnerability can sometimes come through the human relation to the work, in several ways, including that it is understandably hand-made. There is definitely no morality connected to that handmade-ness but more that I can only understand the work if it goes through my hands somehow.

There is a level of animism and anthropomorphism in this work and others I have made. It's definitely between subject and object, perhaps a moth, a garment or a mask.

I like it when the work looks like it is something which has been used or potentially could be used. Not so much a relic but in those same veins could be a sort of sign. This is reinforced in this instance in a new way by the bill board hoarding structure which holds up the raffia piece. In a way it becomes an oracle, as if you could walk up and ask questions of it.

The title is *Echo Peel* and this idea of a sounding board comes into the name and also the idea of it being a membrane. The work is a fragile but also protective layer. It reminds me of another type of outer layer such as a cape, a superhero or other sort of cape, where you change by putting it on.

I am always interested in two-dimensionality becoming three-dimensionality. Echo Peel can be looked at from in front and behind. It is very graphic from a distance and when you get closer becomes more three dimensional. There's a transparency to this work as well and a real tactility. I know that people will want to touch it and I really want that to happen. The surface created by the raffia is very reactive to light, seeming lit up when the sun is behind or reflective at different times and viewing angles.

The work looks like it could be a face, could you tell us more about that?

CA: The two holes could be seen as eyes to see through, to see into, or for you to project yourself from behind. I also see them as moth eyes, those black spots from their wings, rather than eyes for seeing with. We can't help but to see something anthropomorphic if it is there and the fact that we call those wing marking eyes is connected to this tendency.

The shaggy surface is alluring but also somehow a bit animalistic or connected to past times, 1970s knitwear fringes or rugs.

CA: The shaggy surface of *Echo Peel* is similar in some ways to the tufted rugs which I make. I like it when there is something angry or impatient about it. Not too perfect.

There is a lot of drawing still in this piece and in a way the shaggy line is less static. The imperfection brings it closer to emotion in the piece. As the sculptor I have a conversation with the piece as I make it and other people will have their own conversation some of which might mirror mine. I am always interested in some sort of conflict in the work. The appeal versus the repellant is an active field to be in. If you have a push and a pull relationship at least it is a relationship.

Going back to thinking about the work not being static, although of course it is, the raffia looks a little like bird feathers too. These are very fragile but they make a complete layer which can flex and move; this goes back to the ideas of the skin, protection and fluidity which I look for.

By hanging your ceramic works together, as a viewer you can start to both try to understand the surfaces and to have a more emotional or narrative response to them.

CA: I see them as a group of characters, more than masks, as they are defined by their individual grimaces and attributes. The sense of malleability is important to me and in past this came through a juxtaposition of ceramic and leather. In this exhibition made with ESW I had the chance to work with ceramic, glazing and, for the first time, metal casting. The mix of materials, including the metallic glazes, forms a sort of Tromp l'Oeil, where the substance is not obvious.

How do you go about making these ceramic works?

CA: I use sheets of paper clay coming from two-dimensions into three-dimensions, by lifting, shaping and supporting the clay, making a re-traceable action. In this way I can create volume out of the flat sheets. There is something 'make shift' about the shaping, an immediacy. Paper clay is the perfect surface as it takes the marks directly but, in terms of my process, you can really easily overwork it, so I need to work within those parameters, which helps to keep the feeling of immediacy.

I also like the works to look like they have been fashioned for a purpose. The high black loop comes from me seeing faces in handbags and that also ties into the crocodile skin. I like it when materials don't look brand spanking new, as if it's already been used for something else. The large green one is a bit like something made from a big leaf and it can be an extra skin.

As you have the chance to see the works exhibited now, after so long working on them, what relationships would you draw out?

CA: There is an interplay between beauty and ugliness. One (with blue crackle glaze) is reminiscent of a 'Golem' mask, as if something is coming out of the clay. There is a form of narrative here but not telling a story. The grouping is more about conversations between those pieces set together.

In terms of the pairing (of dark angular piece and blue softer piece), on their own they speak about other things but as a pair they are to do with the solar system, with night and day. My eyes bounce back and forth between them, and this takes away from the seductiveness of the glaze and makes it hard to settle, which is good.

The larger, two-part, glossy piece on its own, has another element. In this instance, the location almost comes to be a readymade. I often think about positive and negative of space. This work becomes like the opposite of the windows above it, almost as if it is a snail that can slide up and disappear into the foliage.

The final piece, on top of the ledge to the left, is almost nymph-like. It is the last stepping stone to connect the others to the location and is already almost outside.

The title of the exhibition is Encounter L., how did you decide on this?:

CA: The title is about the invitation but is also about an alienation. I knew I would take something from my studio and mind into this place. So it's connected to how *Echo Peel* in particular comes to be located here.

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Caroline Achaintre was born in France and raised in Germany. She lives in London. Recent solo exhibitions include *Permanent Wave*, Belvedere 21, Vienna (2019); *BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art Gateshead* (2016); and *Fantômas*, De La Warr Pavilion (2018). Her work was included in British Art Show 8, 2016.