

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: HELEN MARTEN

Helen Marten

Plank Salad

23 November 2012 - 27 January 2013

Katie Guggenheim: Although this is an exhibition of sculpture, language plays a really fundamental role, as it does in all your work. This is most clearly evident in the two video works you have made, and in your essays, two of which are published in this booklet, but I wanted to ask about the titles of the works shown here, and the title of the exhibition itself: Plank Salad.

Helen Marten: Naming something is such an exhilarating process, but it calms at the same time, because this wordiness is always entangled with the fringes of what we do everyday. Language is a system that we know very well how to exploit and re-wrap around things. Words are communicating, but at the same time they're tumbling about themselves in a knotty chaos of pictures and images. Language can bruise, activate or dissolve known outlines of things, so finding the seams of where an object becomes recognisable – be that substance or something more linguistic – you can begin to tug it apart and reformulate anew. There is a schematic shift of ideas, where the images of those *ideas* themselves lollop behind words; there is a delay of reference – like trying to match images of bacon to the idea of tasting meat. So giving something a title is somehow connected with the type of breathing space you allow into a work. I mean, of course it's intangible because this naming is like an invisible sticker, but it's also a mechanism that allows a little bit of the nudity of intent in making something to show through. I think I'm interested in wordiness in the same way I like surface, *things*, and both are enormously fleshy when you start to turn them on at the same time.

Giving something a title is almost like giving it a punch line, but more in the sense of an open ended set of brackets that don't necessarily come full circle to clarify a joke. And of course might often not be funny, or are never intended to be so anyway. Asking something physical to stand up and be responsible both to a name, and to gravity is a serious set of propositions! Imagine constantly feeling responsible to fill in the empty speech bubbles in

an empty cartoon cell? It would be exhausting!

Aside from the titles, the works rely on their ability to be named as recognisable things.

We're tracing increasingly close to motifs of anxiety or territory: through curiosity, paths are desperately sought to make known, validate or reinvent the pace of images. A lot of new things I'm doing are quite frantic about the idea of tracing around outlines, of approximations and seams. As tribal humans, we have always been substance abusers: bread might be a tissue, a comedian or some toast. But things don't become frightening until we name them enough to totalise, and so abstract them from locatable origins. There is kinetic excitement in casting a box of cereal in an operatic role, making it sing as a picture and then stripping all language or harmony bare. The layering and side-to-side frictions are important. And I still love the domestic. A master hybridizer of the tulip, for example, is deliberately seeking new species but the cross can only be made between existing stock, existing genes – there is no mysterious matter. What is triggered is an avalanche of overlaps, except the edges are things that can be named. The borderlands of these things are erotic seams in which information is held, but continually dissolved, retraced or overlapped. When you conceal error under fresh layers, it's a strange move towards violence.

In your essay, also called Plank Salad, you use food – specifically salad, starchy carbohydrates and soup, to talk about the work exhibited here.

Plank Salad was triggered by thinking about this idea of what happens to image when substance goes on a diet. Which itself was symptomatic of considering how to translate a body of work from an initial configuration in a different institution which had physically far more space. So in the most elemental sense, it was a way of imagining running this *stuff* through a process of exercise, of dieting it down to make it thinner. But also thinking in reverse about density and the paradox of emptiness in obscenity. I wanted to get to a place of violence, where the work needs to be on the nervier side of collapse, so this metaphor of dieting and food was a very convoluted way to imagine the consequences of posture in a space where very reductive strategies need to be played in relation to whiteness and the entailed ideas of elegance. So soup, salad and starch were three incredibly tactile ways to imagine this process of building up and systematically collapsing outlines. And then what might happen intangibly to the images – the fluffs and proteins – in between! So

these radically different chemical states for food to exist in were dealing with how image is packaged and all the retinal games we can play at the peripheries of things. Starch is a catalyst, but too much leads to flabbiness; salad is fast but complex, fresh, green, *typographic*; and soup has a spooky, ectoplasmic gloopiness in which all certainties are dissolved – pictures are dissolved because the ingredients can no longer be handled – it’s a complicated sludge. And a *Plank Salad* is an absurdly rampant dish! To chew on wood is an impossible invitation, but the comic possibilities of it are quite wonderful. It’s like the anti-manicure of a meal, impoverished, but also a gesture that carries the implications of flourish: a bowl of planks is bravely absurd. And then to imagine the complications of being served this salad in a wooden bowl triggers hilarious frictions between substance hierarchies – what is cut from what! The grammars and rhythms are all upset, or zigzagging optimistically and defiantly all over the place. So in taking the image of a salad but frustrating it with inedibility, there’s a certain brushing up of optical diagram with manual catastrophe.

Do you think of this metaphor of food, and eating, also in terms of the audience’s relationship to the work?

I guess the idea of eating touches on the erogenous zones of surface, of consumption, but it’s also algorithmic; like I say in the text, the idea of eating can be as logical as ‘you’re full you shit, you’re hungry you eat’, so we’re in a certain simplified, syntactical conversation with the actions of refilling – or refuelling – process with substance. There’s a very precarious balance between fullness and vacancy. In a sense, we’ve entered a space of making where the fabric of known things has changed, precisely because the fabric of reality has changed. So we have trepidation of easily nameable parts, because they are pre-loaded with communication; they serve as short hand emblems for ideas that we know have form, so assume to have content. Outlines speak of certainty, but also the flurry of partial destruction. Hand drawn or digital, the line that seeks to enclose or define can also waver. Every figure in space is defined precisely through intersection by a plane of material, by outline or by some corresponding figure of another dimension: we can cut a square from a cube, or a circle from a sphere.

I think carbohydrate accidentally became a very broad metaphor for a lot of the work in the show. All these very physical ideas of substance, density and necessity versus more tangential ways of thinking about how motifs of things we know inevitably carry social content. But also how you can play

delay tactics with this type of content –starch is flabby, it has the possibility to be totally useless and if we eat too much we get fat. So I'm interested in how recognisable things can be a usefully disruptive buffer to legibility. Carbohydrate has the ability to catalyse but also to totally stagnate, in the same way that the alcohol behaves - these things are alchemistic forces, social lubricants but also delay tactics because we can get lost in the saturation. I mean, bread is money, bread is politics, bread is consumption. It is a universal thing – everybody everywhere has starch, whether it's bread, pasta, rice, doughnuts, cereal, even flour. So these things that have a ridiculous potential for reach in all corners of expectation or recognisability. I guess this motif of carbohydrate is something that can catalyse, but ultimately be totally disruptive if we're irresponsible with the use of the outlines!

Are these things ways to talk about volume and flatness in your work?

I'm interested in thinness, and what happens when you show the bones of something; of course you can descend levels and get behind the skin, but you also become witness to the incredible poverty of props. Thinness speaks of ultimate flatness, of regress back to edges but it is complicated by the implied volumes – to be desperately dying of hunger is a vast physical thing, so in that sense, has enormous capacity and there is volume. This idea is also related to one of the Formica panel works, *Ways to inflate*, which sprung from thinking in tandem about perfume and car parks... Andy Warhol said this beautiful thing, that the best way to take up space is with perfume.

Perfume plays with our wonder of the atomic, of molecular things that are invisible but defiantly olfactory and so psychologically volatile. The idea of an atom is so abstract, but of course everything solid is molecular in this way. Perfume cannot be grasped, you can't hold a scent in hand, but it is nicely packaged for distribution, and brands our clothing, scarves and handbags with identity. Like perfume, the dimensions of a car park are also ungraspable. There is possibility for treachery or mistranslation. This difficulty is sexy. Both are expansive and fantastical or *mainstream* but cultivated, exhausting and assaulting. And they're both generic. I mean, the multi-storey car park is probably the most abject example of that kind of psychological transgression of architecture of a space to perform in; a place that is functional, and has enormous volume, but is often left to ruin or abandon. And every city has at least a dozen. There is a constant friction with terrifying flatness, with shine and packaging and behaviour. I like to imagine there's a formula for smelling

attractive and one for parking your car and both boil down to the idea of us wanting to appear like respectful people, with domestic rituals. We all like to pretend that we are people with methods, and ones that allow us the pretense that we're countering space with activity, with effort or discipline.

I also love that some of the Comme des Garçons perfumes position themselves as dangerous by listing 'flash of metal', 'burnt rubber', 'carbon', 'flaming rock' or 'cellulose' in their ingredients. They're totally erotic in a J. G. Ballard-ian way because there's something about fear in it, or a level of carnal aggressiveness that we're mostly too embarrassed to yell about. So there is a connection to the scraped-knees-on-asphalt-exhilaration that somehow swoops perfume and car parks into the same embrace. That danger and excitement happens in the spaces we can't see, or don't spend too much time digging about in because they're either dark and underground, impossibly huge or invisible. So there's a projected imagination, a shaping of image that doesn't necessarily translate into the real. And with that is a constant translation, or mistranslation between speed and flatness, and so temperature too. Or a flipping in between package and product in a way that asks questions about honesty, or whether we even care about transparency if there is an ease to the way we're directed to behave with these ideas. Packaging of course makes all the difference and to be delivered with product - a nice box, an ordered system, a timescale, a *luxury* - allows us to process everything, or think that we are actually engaging with substance, form or emotion.

In previous conversations about your work you've mentioned the idea of compression. Is this different to the flat packing and of invisible volume that you've just described?

I think the idea of compression is something that is against its own will; it's bristling. So compression happens by virtue of necessity. I'm highly suspicious of compression - where all the grubby information goes when it's folded into pixels and algorithms - so the ability to read the temperature somehow gets squashed out of the frame. I like the slipperiness of it, how the transferral works, or how you can miraculously triple or half the content of a piece of information. And with the illusion of instancy, so the sweat and dirt is eradicated or at least momentarily obfuscated. There is something amazingly violent about it, which I'm also interested in with all my work - the boundaries where humour, self-deprecation, sexiness, absurdity and violence all somehow fold into one another. And of course it all riffs on a language

that is very nearly universal... advertising, packaging, special effects. But these things are somehow 'freebies'. Defying volume speaks more about the possibility of shape, and in that, the possibility of weight, of materiality, and relationships of foot to ground.

The ideas of collage and inlay are things I've been thinking about a lot. In collage, there's this wonderful idea that images are more bruised. They're asked to be more vocal about the verbs of squashing and sitting, so the fundamental action of placing one thing atop of another is a problem of weight. Collage is dealing with physicality in a way that is blatant – what we see are things on top of things on top of other things. Like thick makeup, a ceramic glaze or stickers on fruit, we can read the layers, or at least understand there is a between-ness, and so we can name parts.

The inlay speaks less vocally about direction: there is little upwards or backwards, it is a sideward splay – a place of lateral edges, of borders meeting, mapping and adjoining – so there is something of seepage. And seepage is sewage; it is ungodly and dangerous – foulness in form. So in this foulness there is violence – the inlay is violent, possessed of violence for its silent and exacting material tensions. In inlay, everything is contained within the same place, so the surface is, if not flat – protrusions are possible – then entirely of one flatness. Each section of the inlay is part of a concrete assemblage: it is a multiplicity, a segment and so a vibration – there is gross friction. The inlay is *sexy* ... it is a shameless airing of edges, but edges that combine with the intent of singular communication. Material is laid open for inspection and there is no coyness, but instead an erotic self-confidence in surface.

A lot of the materials and objects you've used elicit a very intuitive response. Just the sight of certain things – the kinds of objects that we regularly hold in our hands for example – evoke a memory of how they feel. And that contrasts with some of the highly finished, elements. Binding these two things together creates this weird disjuncture, which is something which recurs in the work... I don't know whether you'd agree with that?

Like the bits of rubbish under the desk units. They are kind of gorgeous, but they are also so casually saturated with touch, they are things we use so they can very easily be transformed into motifs of frustration.

Perfunctory moments are interesting because they can become like notations of a daily ritual. And we understand them, precisely because we can hold them. So to isolate something like this, or to make it perform inside a

behaved, I mean the mechanics of its making are pleasing, it's fun to force something else in there. And what happens can be quite the opposite of performative, because although you're adding to a chaotic space of parts there can actually be something radically formal in it that adds up to a totalised object.

Is this what you mean by 'stylised outings of error'?

Stylised outings of error; that's a good way to think about it. Like the chairs, the olives, the pasta, all these things slip very easily in and out of nameable categories, but they're forced into weird polarised places – either too much, too many or wildly reductive. So rhythm is always kind of staggering along in an en route gesture. I think it's all also to do with hierarchies, and over-designing the optimum position to look at something. And if you mess around with the seams of something, invariably you alter its outline. So I always like to think that things have both internalised delay strategies for showing themselves, but also very surface moments of activation. In the same way a scar leaves a raised and paled gap on the surface of the skin there is a momentary fluctuation in the fullness of surface information, but the material is not displaced, just somehow staggered. There might be a glitch. If something is dishonest, what does it mean for an image to be dishonest? For a cup to be a cup, but also, not be activated as a cup. This is a pretty gratuitous place to be!

So, with the big images of faces, Geologic amounts of sober time (Mozart drunks), you've established cleanness and flatness, and then you introduce the bottles of alcohol hanging underneath to disrupt this somehow?

In this case no part of the scene is allowed to expand, everything is tucked to the edges of the frame, or obscured behind a looming face. Shirt collars, hairlines and eyebrows are inflated to indecent scale and with this obstinate flatness, comes a retinal defiance of volume. Hair doesn't bristle, eyes don't blink, fabric doesn't fold. The image is fossilized – geologic, sober! – but saturated (almost literally) with the potential to slip off the wall into a puddle of alcoholic solvency. And it shudders with all the vitality of something deeply colourful. There is a constant twitching and twisting in and out of pictographic clarity, and sensory mess... lines that are straight, blank, clear but could become drunk, wonky and walk off the screen at any moment.

The domestic objects in the image – the chairs, the bed – become like switches. They wield the idea of activation for the face as *character*, for the unfreezing, or solubility of language. Their presence suggests a zone for activity beyond the frame of the painted edge. Outside, away from this snapshot space, Mozart as a man is free at play, he is mobile, loquacious; he is a lad at leisure to drink, fall down, throw up! But the image is static and Mozart, as a ridiculous and cartoonish idea of genius, is a geologic monument. He is an historical model bound statically to his image, to our expectations of this image, *that* haircut, *the* wig. To culture! There is failure, but cultivation of it too.

As a diagram, this uncannily graphic environment could read as a model or a template, perhaps...something diagrammatic – like a postal stamp – that could be infinitely and prolifically dispersed. The image is graphic, built on vectors and very nearly pictographic. But it is all too big, too flat, too lethargic. There is something that signifies comic authority, except meaning is in a continuous shuffle between assertive speech and drunken babble.

But then when you get up close to the images you suddenly notice the texture of the leather that they are printed on, which is a little creepy...

The action of screen-printing bundles with it the language of package making. From the way we stamp up fruit crates to the strains of ink rolled onto beer mats, the crispness of the dried ink line is one that implies authority and a definitive end destination. The paint is Nylon and there is inherent suppleness in its look, a look that is possessed of the same kind of surface springiness as a rubber ball. But here the printing is not a fast process: it is mechanical, and the method has slowness. But the end product is also joyous, swollen with the anticipation of somebody who knows exactly where the next mark will be, and in exactly what colour. Leather is ancient, sleazy, academic, so to cover its surface with colour is to assume a new skin, to cover palpable deathliness with newly exotic life. Action is one of the most translatable qualities of screen-printing, a process of bleeds and borders and alignments. It is an action of developments, of quite literally changing from one state to another. There are constant moves from the wetness of developing fluid to the dryness of UV light, the thick deliciousness of paint and the soundlessness of paper. Leather has a temperature, it is dense, but not static: there is a vibration to the grain, it is reactionary and paint is skewed, sometimes dribbles. Chance or luck are made momentarily visible. And like the alcoholic implications of the hanging

bottles, all the materials and the baggage of wordiness – the anagrams and the metaphors – are given freedom to sprawl.

Finally, I wanted to ask you about one of the first things you notice as you enter the exhibition; the wall that you have constructed and the decisions about how you have chosen to install the exhibition here at Chisenhale, in a very different way to it's previous incarnation at Kunsthalle Zürich.

This big brute wall is a very contrived architectural intervention. And it's obviously not accidental because it's too big, too elegant and too close. Things are placed together in a way that maybe speaks more about the desire to walk around them or engage in a tactile relationship. By virtue of stagnating an obstacle – of letting something just sit, lie, block – what you're doing is asking questions about gravity... how my feet walk upon this ground and how this ground houses everything else. So there is a single plane of looking, but it's not economical. I've always thought Chisenhale was a difficult space, because it somehow behaves as a view-point that is retinally very honest – everything unfolds immediately from the door.

To style this type of timescale of seeing work – very, very quick – with physical density looks more like panic than aggression. So I was imagining doing something that really interferes with this one deferential viewpoint, something that challenges 'encounter' in a way that is very flat, very immediate, and kind of obvious. And this would be to put up a high wall very close to the entrance, which runs the full length of the space and means you get snags and seams before you even encounter any work. And of course it is looped into a type of fakery that is very blatant, a little theatrical, and demanding of its audience maybe in quite a childish way. And something that speaks of leftovers and margins, as well.

Helen Marten interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events Organiser, Chisenhale Gallery, November 2012.