

## CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: CHRISTINA MACKIE

**Christina Mackie**

*Painting the Weights*

**20 January - 11 March 2012**

*Jamie Stevens: You have been working towards this exhibition for two years and I would like to ask you about how that length of preparation for the show impacts upon the work?*

Christina Mackie: I don't like working for exhibitions. I wanted to use the invitation from Chisenhale to step back from having too many exhibitions and to make work for my own reasons with natural time. I feel there is a natural rhythm to the completion of a set of work, which pretty much always ends up being two-year periods. I wanted to use the time I had for this exhibition as an opportunity to return to that natural rhythm.

*One series of works in this exhibition, 'The Judges' – which consists of three long trestle tables and a shelf with various objects assembled above and below – has been shown previously in a different configuration. Is 'The Judges' an individual work or a collection of works that develops, changing over time?*

'The Judges' started off the back of my being nominated for prizes, which usually means one has to submit long applications. It's a huge honour to be nominated but I would put an incredible amount of effort into putting the applications together. In these applications you write what you earned last year, what you're planning on doing next year – the people judging such prizes know all of your business. It starts to feel very exasperating. To confront this exasperation I would often think about the longer judgement on us, on how we're doing in our very short time on this planet. If we can see faces in rocks, we can see faces in anything. There are potential judges everywhere. I wanted to make work without ego, just throw it together in no more than two seconds. I tried to eliminate choice. I like the idea that it's not a wilful action, that it's an action without perfectionism. I do believe in a kind of perfect balance but it's my balance, nobody else's.

*Your work seems explicitly fascinated with the natural world but that fascination seems to be placed in tension with quite a dystopian*

*collection of material – from atomic bombs to images of social isolation.*

I do use materials that I consider to be beautiful or elegant but the work is dark, no question. The real shape of the world we're living in is what a lot of the work is about. When we breathe in, our lungs make the shape of a cloud. This is the form of our world. I think of it as literalism. I'm a very literal person. Truth isn't a very helpful concept, although I could maybe subscribe in an idea of truth to materials. Truth to all junk!

*Can you tell me about the paper scroll? There are specific historical markers in the images, such as the postcard image of what looks like an ancient Chinese sculpture. How do you come to the decision to include that image, for example?*

I found that image totally by chance after seeing a newspaper article about the sculpture being stolen from this couple from Connecticut who didn't have insurance for it. It's a beautiful sculpture. If I could make a sculpture that looked like that I'd be a happy woman. I'd really feel like an artist. It's one thousand years old and it's gone, nobody knows where it is. That tiny image is how it exists now.

*In the work there is a range of material processes - from digital prints, to painting, to 3D animation - which feel quite time-coded or historically identifiable when placed together in 'Painting the Weights'.*

I love collecting these production processes together. That red paint on the scroll is pure vermilion, it's mercuric sulfide, which is illegal to make now. I have it from years ago. It's a wonderful colour. Also on the scroll is sealing wax, which I want to use to underline the status of the scroll as a document, as an image resource, not a picture. When I was at The Ruskin School of Fine Art during a fellowship, they let me run a long ream of paper through their digital printer. I printed the entire series of Hogarth's 'Judges' and then applied paint on to that surface. I wanted to tease out the sense that the earth was looking at us, that there is a judgement over how we use our time and also just to talk about the fact that I am in a situation where I am potentially judged a lot. I wanted to make a legal scroll of some form.

*The scroll is an extraordinary digital print, it seems to have been made with great technical skill or attention – which certainly runs counter to*

*my own everyday use of digital printing facilities. You have then chosen to apply your own layers of paint on top of that surface, as well as the different panes of coloured glass, with their different interior textures and levels of opacity.*

I was lucky because the printers really agreed to collaborate with me. Asking their machine to operate like that pushes it to its absolute limits and I was very lucky. On the one hand, I wanted to treat the images like textual material, coming back to that idea of the scroll as a document. But then I have these layers of red, yellow and blue paint. Those same three colours also feature in the exhibition with the beacon, the pomegranate and the chrysanthemum.

*You are happy with the exhibition being understood as a single installation of works - 'Painting the Weights' - but within that installation lies a number of larger assemblages which have specific titles and within those titled collections are individual works. There's a lot to unpick but maybe we could begin with the title?*

Yes, the exhibition consists of interlocking sets of objects. I had a burden in the amount of material around me in my studio that I wanted to get out of there. I was thinking about all the material in my studio – not just artworks but all of the junk that amasses there - and its eventual aspect as dust. I decided to make a short film about that. I started asking around about how I could turn objects into dust with animation and a number of people came back to me saying 'your problem will be when it comes to painting the weights', which is the working term for giving the images physical attributes. It's a great phrase and in a lot of ways I could relate to the problem of 'painting the weights' beyond that specific use of the term. We did eventually paint the weights of the objects for the video but we didn't turn them all into dust. What we did do was to create a ripple that runs through everything.

*The ripple of pressure through that animated video connects closely to your previous work 'suppression, repression, depression compression' (1995) in which you exposed incrementally shifting levels of air pressure on to polystyrene cups in laboratory conditions.*

Each set of work I make takes 2-3 years so the fact that the cups were made over fifteen years ago is irrelevant, it's only a few works ago for me. A computer programme is so powerful now. People feel pain at the idea of a life led divorced from the internet but the internet was made by people, as was the incredible object that we made the cups in. In the infinite variety of

life, in the forces available to you, the internet is some crisps, it's nothing.

*Your attitude towards the internet is present in the exhibition, most obviously in the series of photographs printed on fabric and paper which are set within a steel bar display structure and configured around three chairs and beer crates.*

I use the internet all the time, like everybody else. It's fantastic for research. I use it to find out about what varnishes might work on different woods and metals. That's my positive statement about the internet. But I find the loss of substance that the internet brings incredible. I just feel like there is a loss of materiality that everybody seems happy about. I find it deeply confusing.

*That area in the exhibition is titled 'Us' and you took all the photographs whilst on a residency in Melbourne, is that right?*

Yes, all of the photographs are taken from the window of my apartment balcony in Melbourne. The full title of those works is 'Us, The Residents' because I'm in there too. The photographs are of my neighbours and myself, all residents in four residential towers that only contained short-term occupants. I'm one of those people, sitting there night after night, looking at garbage on the internet and watching television. I'm not above it at all. The piece is called 'Us' because I was in the same state as everybody else in those buildings. I included the pictures of myself because often people seem to think the work is about surveillance or voyeurism but that's not what I mean at all. It's just a new condition of being that everybody is implicated in. We no longer expect our possessions to last. We're not interested in buying beautiful curtains and we're happy with that. It would be a strange and rare person that is buying valuable furniture these days.

*But then you have made valuable furniture for this exhibition, in the form of the trestles.*

'Trestle art' is very common nowadays and I'm not ignorant to that fact. I wanted to make some trestles to talk about that move towards trestle art. We've got the red cedar, the black walnut and the green tulip wood. I've had people presume that the works I've made with trestles are infinitely variable, could be arranged by anybody and easy for me to make afresh but that is not the case for me. There are intricate relationships between all the elements, they are chosen in a particular order to accommodate the natural laws at play that I see in the overall pieces. The work is always temporary. You bring it together only for a moment and then it's gone.

*The chairs also seem to confirm the relationship between your studio and the exhibition space. How do the chairs and beer crates fit in to 'Us, The Residents'?*

They are a crucial element and perhaps point out the most obvious play on the exhibition title 'Painting the Weights' in terms of the act of waiting, which I spend a lot of my time doing. Waiting for ideas to come or waiting for deliveries or waiting for the right opportunity. The chairs and the beer crates refer to the balcony in that tower. There are two images of people on their balconies in the exhibition and I love those pictures, the figures are stepping out from it all, just gazing.

*The videos – also titled 'Painting the Weights' - physically coalesce with 'The Judges' but you see them as distinct works. It is a fairly similar framing, with the table-top and works presented both beneath the table and on the surface of the wood.*

The videos are the core of the exhibition. There aren't trestles with 'Painting the Weights' but I suppose there is a very similar solution to a question of the plinth. It's just my way of constructing plinths. The video is in two linking parts and set on a regular, non-repeating loop. The first part is really about the pleasure of looking, specifically looking at that mineral object on the shelf behind the monitor. It's my attempt at a science fiction novel. It's very simple and then leads into a different phase on the same monitor where there are rock crystals going into the sea. The second part is more gloomy, these objects being mashed up and turned into dust.

*You consistently take on the architecture of how to display works and make those decisions prominent to the point where they are works in themselves, both in terms of their strong presence in the exhibition space but also in the materials they are made from.*

The flat steel bar is a good example of that. It's called mild steel but it looks like a ribbon. It looks weightless, you'd never think it was steel. It's a beautiful material that undulates and hugs the wall. By the end of the show the lengths of steel will be sagging. The steel will probably deviate more than any of the wood in that room.

*But then the individual elements that aren't part of the display systems are very strong individual pieces, such as the helmet-like ceramics that are in 'The Judges'. Would you submit those individual pieces on their own, outside of your own framing materials?*

There has to be a very strong rationale between all of the materials. Often I do break up the installation because I need to sell work and it needs to exist outside of that extremely large collection of objects. I have no control over how people will treat the exhibition and I really don't mind how people approach the work. I just try to make everything tense, to create this tension in order to make it work, like a musical instrument pulled tight and balanced.

*So then that balance that you mentioned before is really about tension.*  
Absolutely. It's not like I'm doing this for me, I know there is a visitor coming and they will be looking. I'm not actively communicating to the audience with my work in terms of how it's read. I'm not really interested in that. People's opinions are so unpredictable.

*There is a specific relationship to science in the work and I wanted to ask you about that.*

I'm a sceptical person. People might think I'm new age but I'm actually pretty rational. Scientists believe that they are right and that's another particular level of pleasure, believing yourself to be awake to the real facts. I don't subscribe to that attitude at all. I want to try and use a logical approach, which is what I try to take from science. Everything I do is made with a clear personal logic.

*You have previously spoken of the idea of a 'sculpture without ego'. Can you elaborate on that?*

I don't feel interested in expressing myself or proving how able I am to express myself. Craft doesn't really interest me, either. I am interested in adding to my surroundings, the context within which we exist. It's like in 'The Judges' there are the materials within which we can recognise faces. That's a very human thing. I'm giving into that basic, elementary pleasure we get from seeing faces in the stuff around us.

*One of the most assertive elements in the exhibition is the light piece that hangs near the entrance.*

The lamp is leftover from an exhibition I had at The Showroom in 1999. I've used it before because it's always around. It can emit full spectrum daylight, which relates to a number of the images on the scroll. As you work along the scroll from the jellyfish, to the nuclear tests, to the 1970s advertising image, it then goes back to photographs of a low sunlight picture of my shadow against trees. You could read the whole show in a very simple way. If the

light represents the sun, you can link that to the nuclear reaction. The light is a fission object.

*You mentioned earlier that people will give you materials that they don't want because they think they might be of value to you, as though your art practice will transform the materials somehow?*

That's true but nearly everything in the show is handmade. Look at the rope on the trestles, it's made out of waste fabric and hand tied. Even the bits of the show that might appear readymade have a very handmade feel, like the piece of wood with the eyes that's situated on the table; it was at some point very lovingly planed down by somebody.

*Christina Mackie interviewed by Jamie Stevens, Exhibitions & Events Organiser, Chisenhale Gallery, January 2012. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenale Gallery.*