Tutorial

Jonathan Kearney: 17 June 2019

Jonathan was interested in what I said about working small on a large scale; on showing it, he was surprised by how small it is.

*Do you see that as a maquette?*

Yes, it has been an exercise in working out elements of the process, constantly oscillating between ideas until I felt I had to bring it to a conclusion.

*What do you mean by crude and refined, do you mean the surface of the ceramic.*

Not only of the surface finish but also the way in which I work the material and how the shapes are formed. Where the forms are almost thrown together gives me a dynamic feel but there is an unease due to unresolved elements of conception not necessarily execution.

It is a question of balancing the two approaches, keeping a life force and a more considered understanding of the detailed interactions between forms. I am thinking of the forms as emerging out of the material, transitioning from the crude matter to highly evolved structures alluding to the dynamic, kinetic essence of the process: the sense of something arising out of something else.

*Trying to understand not the working methods but the objects themselves, are they emerging from this base, the source of them and they are growing out of it?*

Yes, it is a maelstrom of life the objects coming out of and entering into this boundary.

*A sense of struggling out of it as well*

Yes, and life being an interaction of things at a very close proximity. I work with the images of people but I feel that would be too obvious. The provisional title *What’s the Difference?* Refers to how we humans behave. That we can control our behaviour and are not totally subject to our instincts or circumstances but we also behave in ways that are analogous to other creatures. We are not separate from nature, we are part of it and subject to its laws, something that is inescapable. That is why I want to give a sense of struggle, of trying to escape out of circumstance.

*And each of those the things you could read them as a funnel of some sort?*

I showed other forms I am making. They change, I am working out whether to make them more or less artificial, using colour and other devices, making them into artificial aesthetic objects, ritual artefacts, representational. I am working between formality and informality in the forms and that duality feeds into what I am conceptually dealing with.

*Those two you look much more formal and refined whereas the ones in the study have this kind of almost amoebaesce feel, a funnel with a sort of throat whereas the others have taken on a more refined form more cells involved etc  You’ve got this maelstrom you’ve got stuff growing out of it then more refined forms emerging at the top like the ones you have showed there.*

Yes, the ones at the bottom are crude and squashed and as you go up they become more defined and acquire greater control over their environment more aware. It is almost an evolutionary allusion. This idea ties in with other pieces I am working on:

a cross between a life form and a ritual object about the length of a person and hung horizontally, suspended and fragile.

Another H. on a large scale with a host of pieces which are its playthings at its base. symbolic writhing forms placed informally beneath it.

*J- kind of modular, could be fit these together in different ways*

Yes – I am working with a mythology arising out of evolutionary ideas, looking at science as though it were a belief system. From the massing of singular works I see a meaning arising. It is still too early to tell although I have a good idea of what they might be but I will leave that to the viewer.

A central notion is that of looking at life in a non-anthropocentric way. I feel we Humans see our reflection in everything and this is a way of looking at how things are without necessarily seeing our reflection in it, that we are not gods – so beware.

*And that is why it is important they are not human forms.*

Yes, otherwise it would be a totally different thing; I am alluding to humanity once removed.

This brings with it the possible problem that people may have difficulty in identifying with the work. I have been told by some that the work is scary and frightening. I have thought about this and it may be that they possess a humanity that is non-human. In my previous work I would often give them names normally associated with human society and maybe this contributes to a sense of unease.

*Is that related to the idea of monsters, the idea of something that has some kind of life form we don’t quite understand, we don’t understand where the mouth is…?*

Yes - but I don’t see them as monsters as such, a monster by definition is something that is harmful, but some people might see them as monsters. They belong to a parallel world we do not inhabit but can see as though, what if we were not here. I am standing in the future, looking at the past of a civilisation that we do not know as human.

*All along you talk about the anthropocene and here you are seeing it from a non-human centric position and yet the anthropocene is very much about the human impact on nature and the significant changes we are making on it. There is no necessarily easy answer to this, in fact there is no answer in some ways; what is in your mind are you angry about the effect of human beings, that is what is subconsciously going on behind this or are you glorying in these pre-human, non-human other existence type of creatures, what is going on behind the scenes?*

I used to be angry at how humanity behaves. These creatures, this mass is all about what happens in large populations. The dynamics of the individual and the group are very different. As soon as people get into groups it seems often to ruin things. It need not be like that, but it seems inevitable and there lies the angst. Groups always divide into roles and eventually something gives way and the larger the group of people the harder it is for relationships to flourish in a wholesome way. You can get on very well with the most horrendous people, they can be entertaining, good company, loyal friends etc but when you see them in the context of a larger group it is quite different. They become selfish, rapacious, aggressive, careless egotistic destructive which is not the case at the individual level. And that I see is the great problem of the world. This idea of the individual vs the collective. The group can work well and cooperate to do great things and often people do and that is great but it can work the other way. And I think these things are almost inevitable. The individual can try to change things but here comes a point where too many factors come into play colouring the situation: experience, circumstance creating a lot more friction. All the individual can do is to try to improve the situation and you do get progress but with catastrophic change you can find yourself back to square one. There is a conflict between trying to improve the world and trying to survive. All this comes out in human relationships: the conflict between conscience and survival, growth and sustainability, improvement and dissolution. Those two things are almost always at odds. At some point the two paradigms rub against one another. I think that this is the tragedy of humanity. Trying to move out of the paradox of progress against regression. I don’t see a way out to be honest.

I know this sounds dark, particularly in a world where resources are contested for more than ever even though there is plenty of land, plenty of food it just doesn’t seem to work. That may be my angst. So, by creating these creatures I express, make comment on that condition without explicitly saying so because to explicitly say so it can end up not saying anything. It is would be just ok, self evident, so what. There is no poetry in that, there is no allusion or metaphor. In art you have to work with tropes and not just literal facts.

I am not pessimistic and certainly not depressive because I think life is a wonderful thing, the world is and we are lucky to live in these times. I don’t think it is bad I just think it is. I am not a politician, I cannot persuade with rhetoric, I am not made that way. The empowerment comes from doing something authentic from the authentic self.

*You chose to use the picture of the tower of babel for your Research Paper and have mentioned it also in this post - do you think that captures the same thing, the hubris of human beings.*

Yes, humans trying to do something and ending up arguing. A punishment for hubris.

*Another reading is, God specifically said to people go and multiply and spread out, diversity will happen once you spread out. At the beginning of that narrative people needed to build the tower to make a name for themselves but they had not diversified, not spread out, they all spoke one language. Their hubris lay in trying to make a name for themselves in front of no one else except god the creator. Therefore the confusion could be read as an act not of anger but of mercy preventing humanity from not creating the mess that would arise out of an act of hubris. Instead, the diversity which was intended in the first place and they had not created was imposed. Speaking different languages meant that they people could not work together, therefore they had to spread out and find people they could at least understand and then create smaller communities around language groups. The reading is an act of mercy rather than punishment.*

The story of Babel reminds me of a short story by Jonathan Trietel, *The Balloon of Babel*. Taking contemporary knowledge, set in ancient times.

Babel does not only suggest a conceptual framework but also a structural one with which to approach the work.

Jonathan then introduced the artist Emily Allchurch who creates composite pastiches of old master painting using photographs she takes of architectural and landscape subjects to build her imaginings in photoshop.

*By focusing on just this one post on this one particular study is opening out all different elements. Also mentioned in that post is the sense of the rational to the emotional, apollonian to dionysian. Where do you place this work, because you a very well read deeply thoughtful person and hand making, does that automatically push it for you into a feeling emotional context? Is there a balance between those two positions, because in this study you said you were moving more into the much more emotional response is that to the materials, the idea, both? I know that is not a very good question but I’m just interested in what that opens up.*

It is really the approach I take to the work, because I can treat the same subject matter in quite different ways, subject matter that is self-generated. I always work under this dichotomy, whether to be formal or informal, more rational or more emotional. This is something I cannot resolve in myself so I do both and in doing both I see how they connect with one another. This study I see it more as an emotional work… at the start. Then the more rational part of me starts to take over and that is when I start to oscillate between being formal and informal and seeing where the neutral point lies and it really does shift according to what triggers one to predominate over the other. It is difficult to identify this point and I need to think about this more. I see things from two sides it is perhaps a reflection of seeing the individual vis a viz the collective, seeing light and dark, formal and informal, rational and emotional all these things inhabit the same world but I find when I try to put them together they just wrestle with one another. There will be an element of one in the other but I have learnt to see them separately even though they coexist, I feel a lot happier doing that. Whenever I try to mix the two consciously I am disappointed this is why, for example in the project proposal, I will present in the final show formal works representing what might be much more informal in another form (this study) such as the suspended piece. It is always an element that resides in the material

*J - That’s the thing I kind of follow what you said there, I was waiting, were you going to talk about the material itself, what do you mean by it resides in the material itself, is it that it is more emotional or rational?*

No, That the material is almost neutral. The way the material is used is a function of how it is approached. Some materials led themselves more to one approach than another. Two philosophies can inhabit the material itself. My difficulty is in putting these two philosophies together, one has to be sacrificed for the other, it is part of the selection process. I personally find this difficult and I think I shall always be like that. Some are blessed in that they can go all the way in one direction but I am always flipping from one to the other.

*If you think specifically about the clay, is there something specific about the clay which is less neutral or is it about the process. It is a very organic material you a shaping and squashing in a very non rational way, you don’t have to think about it, but then later on the process becomes more procedural with the drying the firing you need to do certain things at certain times. Does that mean it shifts from one approach to another, is there something about the material clay itself that means you cannot treat it with the same philosophies at the same time?*

I think you can, but I don’t. As I move along the making of a piece my approach tends to shift from one way to the other. In the past I have left things at an early stage. At first, I am pleased and then I grow tired of them, they don’t feed me as much. I think a lot depends on the context in which they are seen shown and spoken about. When making, I move from a very intuitive stance, I don’t sketch. I just sit there and do something, then out of that process - obviously with big pieces I have to plan, they evolve out of smaller workes, there is a progressive evolution - I don’t think too much about how it is going to be. I am very often pleased, enthralled with how it communicates to me at the early stages but then elements become irksome and I have to carry on the work. It could be that what I am doing is correcting earlier failings and lack of clarity, a property of how I start, intuitively.

Is that a way to balance off the intuitive beginning as it becomes more rational, is balance an important concept?

Yes, I can be out there at times but essentially I have a philosophy that centres me, I am not self-destructive or extreme although to do what I have done in the way I have done it, you have to be extreme. There is a balance there. That is why at the beginning of the course I said I am full of contradictions and I accept those contradictions, embrace them and try to use them rather than try to even them out or select one way or another.

*-* Here I show the bust*.* This is something I did which is very informal and left it as it was it is very ill formed. In the right context it could be interesting and I left it to remind me that things can be different but somehow there is something that tells me this is not right although I quite like it. Perhaps because it expresses one side of me, again this balance thing. It is interesting, if put in the right place it could work.

*J - Arguably its right place is exactly where it is as a reminder, as a question hanging there by the window in your studio.*

Going back to my work, I think I am expressing my concern, anger, dissolution with humanities inability to get things together and I ask myself why? We like to think of ourselves as divine beings with a spark of divinity which is able to see beyond this world and conceive of a better one. That’s wonderful but we seem to repeat the mistakes every time. I feel we don’t always have to make iconographic reference to humanity to talk about humanity, that is what my work is about. The rebel in me ask why am I going to do another picture of a person, another photograph of a person another thing about society, the rebel tells me everyone is doing that, I am going to do something that references that but not overtly.

*You are referencing through your visual language and what you have created here is an alphabet, or a vocubulary, vocabulary is better than alphabet. You have developed a vocabulary here, particularly this work with the clay, which is something you have developed over a number of years and this is what you are exploring.*

And what I am doing now is different to what I have done before which was very rational, radially symmetrical, spreading outwards with detailed surface. Now I am digging in deeper beneath the surface probably the surface of myself to see what emerges. The work is now allowing me to express things that before were more contained, more rational and the irrational was in my mind more than anything. Now I am being more rational about the ideas, but the work has more irrationality about it. That is an aspect of what I am working on at the moment. I am trying to break open what I referred to at the beginning of the course as that carapace of rationality and better understand what lies underneath, how it is expressed in the work. If it is sound, valid certainly, then it might ring a bell in someone else’s mind. However, you do have to have a lead in with ….

How do you feel about nowadays that a lot of work is very overtly about people, society, humans, very overtly saying this is how it is, how do you see this atmosphere in relation to something that is non-anthropocentric?

*I think your work presents an ambiguity that encourages an investigation. Not everybody is going to bother with it sadly, that is the reality, but those who do it will reward them in the conversation. Those who give it time and chose to engage with the thinking, their own interpretation their own views as they look at the work, they will be richly rewarded. Sadly, an awful lot of visual culture, Instagram is not just a very very clever form of branding, it is actually a dangerous description of the world. Insta, Instagram literally, the flicking through rather than pausing, waiting, taking time, so I think sadly probably the majority of people won’t engage but those that do will be richly rewarded, that is what I feel about it.*

A corollary of this is, how explicit do I need to be in order to bridge that gap in terms of either presentation or explication because to be didactic is not a good thing but to leave people wondering whoa - not wondering what it is because the feedback I get from audiences means it does transmit something - but to open out a deeper conversation; how does one signpost the possibilities on offer - is it not in our gift to do so and alas a task for the viewer?

*That is an impossible question to answer. It is the sort of thing you have been exploring for many years and many other people have and as you said, the avoidance of didactic approach is vital. As soon as you try to explain work away literally it explains it away, it gets rid of it.*

It’s interesting you say that, because a few years ago they were talking about demystifying art and I used to think that was basically killing art. Art should be a mystery it should not be explained away to make it accessible. 

*It was that beautiful line a few weeks ago when Jonny Briggs came in. He was doing a workshop with kids at Tate. He asked who likes to be confused in an art gallery and all the kids, 7 year olds, put their hands up and the two teachers didn’t. So why, and one child said because when I am confused in a gallery it makes me have a conversation with the work. What wisdom for a 7 year old.*

At that age children are very underestimated. (Here I talked about my experience at a recent workshop I gave on abstract art introducing the idea of abstract and non-objective art which the children immediately understood.) Then it gets knocked out at the age of ten, eleven.

*One thing I have noticed though from experience in terms of your impossible to answer question, Its maybe a personal thing so take it with a pinch of salt but personally I quite dislike untitled, works that say untitled 1 untitled 2. Sometimes it makes sense, I am not dismissing it all the time. I am not even saying it is laziness on behalf of the artist, it feels to me a missed opportunity. With a work of art a title can be a wonderful other way into it not an explanation. A bit like you say for this ‘What’s the Difference’ it can literally be a question and be very effective when it is a question. A title can give a hint about what the artist was thinking but without stating it because you cannot; because you are not writing an essay about it. A carefully worded title has the potential at least to be a wonderful access point into a work without explicating it completely.*

*I have seen, quite cleverly, people do untitled then in brackets the actual title because it makes it more of a proposed title instead of this is the title. It is speculative instead of definitive.*

I have done work where the title changes, the title depends on how I feel about something, where it is seen: it is a way in but not the only way in.

*What’s intriguing about your work as well (A title gives almost a, ‘this is how I see it’ - the balance between the rational and the emotional - just for the sake of it, we both know what we talk about here we just use those two works.) When I see the work, to me its emotional, the title might give me something more rational as a way into it, so in a way just a subtle title like ’What’s the Difference’ gives me something else, just a little bit more but it’s more of a rational thing [the title] because it’s text it’s language, language is designed to be clear communication, it is designed for that - the Tower of Babel was the confusion of that so they could not communicate. The title can act as that rational thing, then the visual, the tactility of the thing, the writhingness of it this particular piece as well [is the emotional part]. So in a way you are presenting a balance of those two things.*

The title is the entry of words into the work, because until then the work is unspoken. That is why very often I have difficulty in talking about my work. It is only in retrospect that I can say ah, that is what it is about, that is what I was doing. But that is a constructed narrative when I am actually doing it, I could be thinking about anything, irrelevant, relevant things. Often, however, I feel the title is the entry or intrusion, the injection of words which are in themselves rational entities. You can use poetry as a non-rational form, but poetry as a non-rational form is a difficult thing to do. Most poetry is pretty rational and pretty structured even if it may not seem so. But when you have poetry which is emotional without being melodramatic or cloying… it is a difficult one because words are labels and as soon as you use words you are labelling.

*And obviously there is a big danger there, if you over burden it with a title and close down the meaning with the choice of words, reduce the space for its meaning then that can damage it as well. But in the sense of the question, ‘What is the Difference’ I think it is a really good title. Because obviously when you’ve got, we have spent over an hour now talking about this one study and its not even a finished piece of work… it is very rare you are going to get that opportunity with a member of the audience. It is giving, as you say yourself several times in your blog, the idea of simplified language, not to reduce the depth of the work but to give access to it… rather than using the ‘in’ language that we might use because we have a similar understanding and language can be very helpful in that way*

Jargon is really shorthand and it can be misunderstood. I have done this many times, misunderstood things and used jargon as a way of covering up something I have not really understood well enough to explain, and used the jargon as a notion rather than a clear idea. That is the problem, with using jargon everyone as a notion which is not clearly thought out. So I’ve tried to simplify my language when I write and by doing so I have found that syntax changes, grammar changes; that simple words can be used to construct ideas which are actually very complex. However, if you get too complex you can get lost along the way. I have tried to simplify my language to avoid coming out with a lot of rubbish. 

*Another thought on that as well is that writing about your own work as a way of explicating it to an audience is still a valid thing to do, there is nothing wrong with it. Like for me, I am uncomfortable if there is a big statement next to the work explaining it, that is too much of a burden on the work itself at least it does not give room to communicate. But the ability to write about work is a special thing and you have that but maybe it’s another layer. It is something that is not necessarily up front it’s something that someone if they really enjoy the work they see the title they can go and investigate it further and find a piece of writing about it. But then that writing can close things down… it could also say this is my offering to you as to what I was thinking but actually there is space for you…*

I think that is a very valid thing. I have learnt this from Janet, it is very important to speak and write in the I form rather than the third person or passive form when talking about my practice; when you make it personal you are saying, this is what I think but it may not be necessarily what you think: It makes a valid statement rather than an unsupported generalisation.

I have narrowed things down to the ideas and notion I am going to work on but not the actual work, that I will do over the Summer/early Autumn. The Research Statement I am going to do bit by bit, hopefully it should not be too onerous - says he - but I need to plan the final works well in advance. I have not wanted to work on these yet because I have changed completely since I started and my thinking now is different. However, I do need to start to crystalize something now, I did not want to be too formed at the beginning.

*That’s not a negative thing, I have an almost small leap of joy when I hear a student say, things have changed from what I imagined at the beginning, that’s the point and you know that anyway, from actual making work, that’s what happens. You have an idea and then find things change dramatically through the process of making it. A lot of people come into the Masters thinking it’s got to be sorted from the beginning but actually there is time. I dread to think what in the future will happen when the Masters is only one year, how they will have time to do that but that is their problem. Within two years there is time for that, time to start on a direction then change and find other ways. There really isn’t a problem in terms of timing. Obviously you know the timings you need in terms of the shear practicalities.*

I have to plan ahead. That is one thing that stops me from being as spontaneous as I could be. I have to allow for each work about three months; obviously they can develop contemporaneously. It takes a lot longer to do something than you thought it would. In fact, when you look at a lot of artists, not so much nowadays, but in the past, their life’s work was a few hundred things unless you were like Picasso churning them out. Nowadays it’s a little bit different, unless an artist is wholly commercial or has a big studio with assistants etc, you find artists have slowed down again.

And that’s a good thing, a very good thing. The argument is, that most of the work we make has one purpose, which is to teach us how to make our work, not to be great works of art that gets seen by anyone else. Their job is simply to help us learn how to do the work. 

Yes, one thing is a sketch for the next.

*I did not plan to talk only about that one work*

No, it has made me think about what I am actually doing at the moment and how to articulate it because I have moments of clarity and then moments of cloudiness. It is important to spend at least a bit of each day in the studio

*What you’ll love to hear, I think you won’t like this bit, we have explored a lot of issues today, haven’t we.*

Or could they be problems. No, they are issues, we talked about them but have not come up with any solutions, we’ve skirted around the subject

[Chit chat about the 2 Girls Gallery]

The prints are totally digital mouse drawings. I was working with some photographs and found, as I always have done, that things that are purely generated using the computer work better than hybrids of digital and analogue. Allchurch’s work is different because the images are highly manipulated in photoshop and have homogeneous processing from capture to final result. However, superimposing, layering or what have you, of one medium with another does not seem to work for me.

At this point we drew the tutorial to a close.