

Issue 06 – Catriona Robertson

SOS / Sculptors on Sculpture is a series of weekly condensed interviews with early career contemporary sculptors.

Catriona Robertson's work explores architecture and the monumental; she uses a combination of discarded materials to construct monstrous and spatially awkward sculptures bound together with amalgamated cast surfaces. Fragments of previous sculptures become the aggregate for the next in a constant regurgitative flux. Responding to the site, she will make and un-make the work in the same space, in a performative interaction between the object, audience and site.

SOS: This is the sixth interview in this series with contemporary sculptors, a reoccurring question through out has been about the Covid-19 lockdown. How have you adapted to the lockdown? You tend to work on a large scale, has the confinement impacted the scale of your thinking?

CR: I must admit it has been quite the change for me and I haven't been able to adapt my usual practice, but I haven't felt the need to. I've been pretty busy since graduating, so I've been trying to use this time to catch up with a lot of things I've been ignoring. Between doing my MA full time for the last two years at the RCA whilst juggling a job, doing a few intensive residencies and large scale exhibitions, (let alone trying to squeeze a social life in somewhere) I realised I had not spent much time at home lately. It's just been a place to sleep at night and I'm so used to being active all the time, the prospect of staying at home was a bit of a shock to my system. I did pack a few tools from my studio very quickly just before lockdown and brought them home with me, but I didn't really have any specific plans. Instead of making sculpture, my flat has become my work in

progress. I've been doing quite a bit of DIY and decorating at home, re-painting the walls, putting up shelves and also baking, which has helped me to keep active in a different sort of way and refresh this space again (although the paint delivery took a long time, it finally arrived!). I've also used this time to redesign my website, writing proposals, doing some drawings for future projects and learning some new digital skills too. I've edited a couple of videos of my sculptures, which is something I've been meaning to do, as it's difficult to photograph my work. I'd like to make more videos in the future now I have learned the editing programme.



'Hide and Seek', 2020,
Paper-clay, paper-crete, chain , 300 x 50 x 50cm

SOS: In the second issue I interviewed Susie Olczak whom you undertook the Standpoint Gallery Residency with until quite recently. She spoke very highly of you and Veronica Neukirch and the resident studios. What was your experience of the residency? Particularly so soon after graduating.

CR: It was really fantastic. Myself, Susie and Veronika applied to do the residency together and it was really motivating to have that peer studio dialogue again. My work is site responsive and observing the architecture of spaces, and Standpoint isn't the usual white cube space. I made two works, one was hung inside the old lift shaft, that resembled a rubbish chute from a building site made out of cast debris from the studios. The second sculpture was on a stage, that was quite a weird space, but became a bit performative for me. The residency was all about process and experimenting with new materials, that was really freeing after just finishing art school. I think my brain had turned to mush after the RCA, (or maybe during) so that was good to not think too much about what I was doing!

I was on another residency immediately after graduating for 2 months, from July to September last year at the MERZ Gallery in Sanquhar in Scotland. While that was a really fantastic opportunity, I felt it was a little too soon, I was on my own and quite burnt out. Luckily that residency was more about engaging with the community who kept me going, and I really enjoyed doing workshops with local children, again not overthinking what I was going to make just using the materials I found and building as I went along.

[Guest Question] Adapted from an interview with Huma Bhabha in conversation with Negar Azimi in 2019. 'The materials themselves have the quality of evoking refuse, detritus, the leftover and discarded. Can you tell me a bit more about the materials you use?'



Installation view of 'Burrow-Sprout-Grow', 2019, Royal College of Art Degree Show, South Kensington, London

CR: My practice is heavily rooted in materials and processes. While I respond to architectural sites I also respond to material, and I am a bit of a hoarder! I like doing a bit of everything, woodwork, metalwork and casting, generally getting my hands dirty. I like to find reclaimed or discarded materials to build with, maybe because it's quite cheap and I can re-use them in multiple ways. I'm fascinated by the duality of concrete as a monumental material, simultaneously historic and futuristic, strong and fragile, a synthetic stone-like material. I have become obsessed with the concept of aggregate, where everything and anything is aggregate, I usually mix a combination of my own materials together to test the strength of it or see how they turn out. During the residency at Standpoint, I collected a lot of rubbish - paper scraps from the printmaking studios, and old clay from the ceramic studios to make paper-clay. I also tried out some paper-crete recipes (that is cement mixed with paper-pulp)

The paper-pulp became a sort of reinforcing fibre, which meant my sculptures were almost 70% lighter. But I can't really do that at home right now!

I did recently manage to find some 16kg bags of flour, so I can start doing paper-mache at home if the lockdown continues, we will see, or maybe I'll just keep baking.

SOS: What's more exciting to you the idea or the execution? Do you make maquettes or digital drawings for larger works or do work you more intuitively?

CR: A bit of both. I get really excited by an idea, and I also love installing work in the exhibition space. I need a good playlist when I install my larger sculptures and will sometimes dance a bit as I install them! I follow my instinct a lot and try not to get too hung up on being overly conceptual. I have a good idea of how it should look but I don't always know exactly until I am installing it, or sometimes as I am making a mould I am never sure it will work, because I experiment with my mixes that are often different the minute you scale up, so it's hard to make maquettes. Instead I do smaller tests in my studio that will often be failed attempts and happy accidents.

I usually start off with photography, taking quick snaps whenever I travel or just on my commute to work, smartphones make this much easier now. I never if rarely take selfies or photos of people, just random bits of architecture, ruins, follies or oddities in nature that catch my eye. I translate these into terrible sketches at first and illegible notes about various construction processes and measurements. I carry a sketchbook everywhere and do drawings on the tube if I'm not cycling. I tend to use Illustrator and Photoshop to do mock ups at a later stage

for proposals, and sometimes will do some digital drawings of components that I have cut out on a CNC machine, but I am now trying to learn Rhino so that I can do more accurate constructions.

SOS: Is there an artwork you've made which marked a significant shift of direction or concept in your practice?

CR: Yes definitely, I took part in an amazing residency in Oslo during the summer 2018 after my first year at RCA. It was with PRAKSIS, supported by an awesome fabrication studio Fellesverkstedet, and mentored by a sculptor Gereon Krebor. I had no idea what I was going to



'Rock Paper Scissors', 2020,
Paper-clay, paper-crete, paper-mache-clay,
PVA, timber, plywood, 244 x 55 x 45cm

make and was feeling a little rusty as I had just finished writing my dissertation. We were working in an old factory that was going to be torn down and in response to this we were encouraged to make work for an exhibition that was both 'monumental' and 'temporal'. We visited a waste /recycling centre where we collected some materials to make sculpture with. It was an odd way to do it, as I still had no idea what to make, but they were really generous and gave us a lot of free timber, sheet material, old lino, textiles, building materials. Working with the Fellesverkstedet studios gave me access to using a CNC machine for the first time in my sculpture. They helped me to realise my construction on a scale I had not imagined, and I ended up installing a 7m high sculpture! I was in absolute shock after it was up and I was so tired, but it was worth it as I learned so much during that residency and was really thankful to have been motivated by such an inspiring group of people. I find I do my best work now on residencies so I'd recommend applying if you get the chance.

SOS: Besides your practice what's filling your time right now? Are there any books /television/ podcasts you'd recommend?

CR: I think it's important to have a bit of down time, so I've been binge watching Star Trek, as a view into another world while I'm stuck at home, especially the Next Generation! And the Walking Dead (and Fear the Walking Dead), tips on preparing for a future apocalypse...!

For a sculpture fix though I'd recommend the podcast 'Sculpting Lives' by Jo Baring and Sarah Turner, that features women sculptors discussing the preconceptions of sculpture as a man's world in the 20th Century, to current living women artists in Britain. I do find that some



'Rock Paper Scissors' (detail), Paper-clay, paper-crete, paper-mache-clay, PVA, timber, plywood, 244 x 55 x 45cm

people are surprised, given the scale of my work that I'm a woman, so I feel this discussion has resonated with some of my feelings about the challenges of being a female sculptor. I've also been reading the book 'The Artist's House from workplace to artwork' by Kirsty Bell, and it's giving me some ideas about possibly making an installation at home. But like I said I'm actually just focusing on enjoying being at home and not physically making work at the moment, it can be exhausting building large things!

Interviewer: Josh Wright