

# HERE / THERE

10 Feb – 05 March 2022

Charlotte Dawson

ABINGDON  
STUDIOS

Abingdon Studio Ltd is pleased to welcome artist Charlotte Dawson to exhibit works across our Project Space and Window Gallery.

Working between her studio in Sheffield and site visits to Blackpool, Charlotte Dawson, has created an entirely new body of work reacting to the visual and material language of Blackpool. Through a series of sculptures which derive their shape from dining plates, Charlotte explores the blurred lines between work and leisure.

Dawson's practice focuses on the parameters of the 'object' and the multiple purposes and sentimental readings objects can possess. In this new body of work Charlotte poses questions around object worth, acts of mass production and duality of purpose within a vessel used in both forms of service and for decorative purposes.

The sculptures which have arisen from this period of funded residence are now exhibited at Abingdon Studios across our Project Space and Window Gallery provisions.

Dawson approached the residency by questioning what Work and Leisure means and how these two seemingly disparate words can be aligned within a singular object. She initially proposed a series of sculptures based on the form of ceramic plates which took direct influence from the visual and material imagery and culture of Blackpool. Whilst questioning the wider blurring of lines between these words which occurs within this environment. Beginning with the basic concept of the plate as a vessel associated with labour, service, care and pleasure, she looked at the ways that these can manifest within a physical object – the plate as a practical object, as an ornament, as a souvenir, and an object of commemoration.

Her intention is to exemplify the multiplicity of this object, not only through subject matter, pattern or design but through the production process typical of her sculptures. She sculpts a singular object in clay, in order to produce a multiple in her studio. From this original, a silicone mould is created. Using this mould multiple pieces can be cast in Jesmonite. In creating a series of objects that transcend the traditional materiality of the original object, the mould allows for the possibility of mass production and for the possibility of repetitive action in order to produce a uniform object. Despite this 'uniformity', the individual casts hold within their own physicality the traces of the artists hand, fingerprints are left embedded in the clay and cast into the jesmonite. Each cast plate, although identical in shape, show variation of pigment.

Within each object Dawson looks to question what constitutes a mass-produced object and which stage of the process could be seen as enjoyable, an act of leisure, to produce one singular ceramic plate over the mass production of many? Within each object there is a tension brought about by the presence of the hand – hand made, hand – cast – and the act of the repetition within the process. The melting distinction between production and manufacture and the work and leisure results in objects which find themselves at a threshold of human and clone.

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## Q&A – Charlotte Dawson in conversation with Garth Gratrix

1.

It feels like this exhibition has been inevitable for some time. Since exhibiting together back in 2019 as part of the Neo Art Prize, Bolton Art Gallery. Your piece was titled Lumber and used Bronze, aerated blocks and beech. What would you say your shifts or discoveries have been since then and how might that feed into our understanding of the materials we are seeing presented in Here/There?

I remember you getting in contact with me during that exhibition to introduce yourself so it does feel inevitable that we'd end up working together and I'm really glad that it's been on this project. I think my work has developed since that point where we were introduced to each other's work. This project, similarly to the piece 'Lumber' is concerned with a tension between two forces. In Lumber I was physically showing it in the precarity of the piece itself. Here/There is more of an exploration into the forces at work in a place and pieces that hope to point a finger at that or just to suggest a way into thinking around that. Since creating Lumber I've become more concerned with representing something recognisable in my work more than I maybe was before.

2.

Here/There has evolved following a residency in (and out of Blackpool) during the pandemic and as part of our WORK/LEISURE residency programme. How was that for you and help us understand some of the key decisions you made as an artist following site visits and putting them into context for your work?

It was definitely a unique experience because the residency ended up happening between two places. I visited Blackpool multiple times during the residency and collected objects and imagery from those visits which inspired many of the pieces included in the exhibition. But also a big part of the residency experience during the pandemic was that I produced the sculptures remotely in my studio in Sheffield. And as the project grew, more pieces arose and connections began to form not only between work and leisure but between these two places, as well as other sources of inspiration from the actual objecthood and design of plates themselves. This is why this project focuses on all elements of the residency, it doesn't exclude the fact that there was a partnership between places. I think that only adds to the artwork because there's a connection between work and leisure in the sculptures and a division of work and leisure in the two locations that produced the artwork.

3.

I am curious as to where the interest in commonplace homeware came from? Simply as a result of being in residence or beyond this response to place and much more rooted in your research and oeuvre to date?

My work often includes the use or depiction of everyday and familiar objects and so I think it's less that I have an interest in homeware but an interest in particular objects. As part of my proposal for the residency I referenced exploring the depiction and function of plates within Blackpool. Specifically, the sugar rock plates depicting the English Breakfasts and Fish and Chips in moulded sugar. I knew that Blackpool and the Work/Leisure residency would provide me with the opportunity to really lean into an interest in the object and provide me with a way to fully explore this and build a better understanding of myself and what I was trying to say in the work. But I think the interest in plates as an object has been something that's been in the background of my practice for quite a few years but I wasn't aware how that would work out and the Work/Leisure residency provided me the space to work through this.

When I left university I completed a graduate residency with Airspace Gallery, Stoke on Trent. Although I didn't produce any plates during that time, I did skirt around such objects, using existing plates in an interim exhibition. Using plate moulds to cast concrete tops to sculptures and using remnants of ceramic plates to lead a trail throughout the gallery. During the residency, I also photographed some plates from the Potteries Museum archive which were really useful during this project to help me develop the artworks.

Because I don't work in ceramics, I have always worked around the object which is something I like to do anyway in my practice. To imitate rather than recreate and so maybe the manufactured falsity of the sugar rock plates in their imitations of food, freed me to be able to explore the plate as a form of imitation.

4.

Why ordinary objects, or should we say found? The readymade? Where do your senses take you when exploring your sculptural practice and the visual language you develop?

I think that for me the choice of object or the materials that I use stems from something that's already happening without my presence, as 'the artist'. I choose objects that already have a capacity to be taken past functionality. Objects that contain something more than a purpose and that people are already forming connections with and using to build part of an understanding, of self or of place or to hold collections of memories. Ordinary objects have the capacity to reach the widest audiences, they're used and altered by many people because they exist alongside our lives. The objects I use change as do the connections but my interest remains in finding those connections and then working with them to create something new.

5.

Commemorative and complex harbourers of sentiment? This is such a rich statement in response to the ordinary object. Can you tell us more about your theories around this and of your reference points leading you to this reflection on the objects we use?

Sometimes that could feel risky, especially when the connections aren't so clear because the objects I explore are more overlooked. But in this case, I believe that rings true, the plate is an object that holds so many uses past the purpose it was intended, even when many plates are created specifically for purposes we wouldn't expect right away. One of the plates I came across during research, the Mather's fly paper plate, was made specifically for holding fly paper, without reading the decoration it looks and could function as any other plate. There are many other plates that aren't intended to be eaten from like commemorative plates of royal events and plates with such intricate decoration or very detailed surface textures that no real function is viable. These objects are produced solely for decoration but implemented as an object whose reason for existing is supposedly to serve a singular function. These are examples of planned divergences from the purposeful to the decorative, commemorative and unsuspected. But lots of other connections are formed between the object and owner that go widely unnoticed. The repurposing of plates within the home, the significance of others in our connections to these objects and the worth attributed to a plate depending on its appearance, material and the context in which it is displayed.

6.

Tell us from your perspective about touring the work from Blackpool to Sheffield. What commonalities or polarity is there for you in how this helps progress your work and thinking?

The work began with the Work/Leisure residency and will be shown in two exhibitions titled Here/There. Here in Blackpool and in Sheffield. The work has a balance and tension between two forces and, in the exhibitions, between two places. Exhibiting the work in both locations allows for this tension to be explored. The work can sit simultaneously where it came from but wasn't made and where it was made but didn't arise from. What will come from these exhibitions will be different ways of viewing the works through having the opportunity to engage with different curatorial input and also a way of revisiting the residency intentions and bringing the ideas into form. How the works are displayed in each exhibition will also alter the reading of the pieces. The sculptures themselves are part of one whole artwork and until this is installed in a space it hasn't existed as a 'piece', more like Vinettes. For me, it's interesting in my practice to work with curatorial input to extend the artworks lifespan through its placement and therefore context.

7.

Can you give us a sense of labour attached to your work and sculptural practice? From titles such as Lumber, to our residencies exploring work/life balance. What is the 'graft' involved in putting together this exhibition?

A large part of my practice is working in multiples which means that a lot of the labour connected with my work is because I'm reproducing something repeatably. That process can be quite long when working with materials like jesomonite and concrete. The labour is strenuous when producing multiples. It's something that's connected with my work because I use objects that themselves are mass-produced and also because my practice is often concerned with the notions of collection and of collecting. In singular pieces, like embroidery work, the labour comes in the repetition of the process of stitching. Ironically the embroidery probably takes the longest, whilst producing the smallest thing.

The pieces in this exhibition are cast in Jesmonite from moulds that were produced from singular clay sculptures. More time and work goes into the production of the casts than in the creation of the original. That's purely because of the number of plates I have cast. But there's an interesting part of creating in this way because the original plate in clay gets balled up and reused. No piece exists until a decision is made that it does. I cast in the mould to see if it's worked, to experiment with the colours. Only when I've worked that out and cast pieces, I'm happy with them I'll try and replicate that and I can do that multiple times. I will inevitably have more plates made than there is in the show and so where the artwork actually lies is strange when working like this. There's no original, there's an empty space in a mould that creates all the pieces and there are multiples of these, not one singular final cast and more pieces than we may ever use.

I think the notion of 'work' is probably something that I hold as being intrinsic to the pieces. Even if I wish sometimes it wasn't so taxing to produce the work. The objects that I create often have a connection to someone else's labour prior to my own. The plates I'm inspired by were produced by others but more simply. The plate as an object itself has a main purpose of serving and in that it presents us with multiple layers around 'working'. I think it seems fitting that the stages of producing these plates is a multi-layered process.

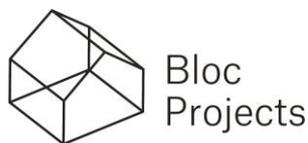
8.

Outside of your use of plates in the exhibition we also see other pieces in the window including a collection of small busts depicting the heads of puppets and an embroidery piece. Can you describe what inspired these pieces and how they link with the other works in the exhibition?

The time spent in residence in Blackpool enabled me to collect a lot of imagery related to the location, alongside my physical research. The pieces in the window have a more direct connection to Blackpool as a place. The small busts were inspired as a mix between iconic imagery associated with Blackpool and the notion of idolatry. There's a restaurant in Sheffield that has small busts of Chairman Mao on the turns of the handrail on the stairways. The paint has worn off revealing the pink plastic beneath as people's hands have travelled across them. That imagery has lingered with me for a while and the idea of placing something in a place that you would often touch. Is that touch then an act of admiration or seeming admiration occurring through the forced interaction? When I visited Blackpool and found these remnants of a past time in a display cabinet that no longer worked to make them dance, situated in the back of a souvenir shop. Their interactions with people had become limited. I repurposed their imagery and pushed them into the realm of idolatry and function.

The fabric that hangs below the pieces can be seen as a reference to both the skirts that you may find around traditional puppets and the hanging of tea towels. These two components have a direct relation to one another as a play on the imagery of puppets and also with the plates in an imagined dining situation or as a tool used in service of the plates.

The embroidery piece similarly explores the souvenir aspect of Blackpool. The Blackpool tea towel as a commemorative object. I've used embroidery, a process associated with remembrance, often depicting specific locations and landscapes to create fabric pieces that exemplify the embroidery through size but removing prestige. Using pre-existing fabric to play with the imagery of an oversize tea towel.



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