

Charlotte Dawson  
Set in Sediment  
AirSpace Gallery, 22 February to 2 March.

We meander.

For many, we meander through life like a river; searching for traces of past stories to add meaning to current narratives: rarely is this a linear process. A graduate's journey post-university, and a residency too, is riddled with curving pathways, misdirections and meanderings. Charlotte Dawson's first solo show, *Set in Sediment*, tussles between an intrinsic want for stability and continuity through memory and a desire to loosen the archetypal clasp placed around objects, heritage and culture. In many ways, *Set in Sediment* is an apt metaphor for the manner in which we excavate former lifelines in a bid to formulate our own identity: we sink, slowly, into a bed of historical debris, accompanied by materials demoted and now deemed "too lowly for show."

The culmination of her Graduate Residency at AirSpace Gallery, *Set in Sediment* provides an insight into Dawson's findings and her new-found relationship with the city. Over a period of six-months, she has scoured the local landscape for relics from the past, spurred on by her own interest in collecting as a form of "memory making" and the characteristics of material matter. Much like the weightiness of the items that she collects – pottery shards, pebbles, stones and discarded moulds – the show expresses an ongoing sense of literal and metaphorical heaviness. Within the space, we spend most of our time looking at our feet, tracing a long, winding river of pebbles from the front to the rear of the gallery.

Woven amidst the pebbles are shards of pottery. They're studded, sporadically, throughout the meandering path, collating like sediment on the bends. The river's top and tail are each bunged up with a mass of tiny pottery pieces as though to emphasise the perimeters of the exhibition space. More pebbles line the window-bed, providing a ruckled platform for four terrazzo-like slabs. Typically, terrazzo is made of segments of marble or granite set in concrete, and polished, giving it a glimmering veneer. Here, Dawson has dyed her concrete a deep grey and embossed it with ceramics fragments. Each shard sinks into the concrete and is repurposed as part of a new building material or aesthetic tableaux.

Through Dawson's process, these relics – abandoned on a residential brownfield – are reevaluated as part of new, aesthetically augmented objects. A piece of *Johnson's* pottery (the "Johns" part is still legible) sighs in an effortless bid to reconnect with a former master: we're steadily drawn back to the constructs of industrial heritage and the slabs sink into a sea of pebbles, mimicking boreholes in the ground. Behind, a family of 12 concrete bollards witnesses my visit. They stand proud, like personified totems, wedged between the past and present. Atop each bollard is a cast of a cake-tin mould: its pattern is meditative as it swirls inwards like that of an infinite shell while its form provides the bollards with a new function – that of a plinth.

Like the slabs, the bollards play with our sensibility of weightiness: their concrete exteriors are filled with expanded polystyrene making them much lighter than they appear. Similarly, the pebble-print fabric which hangs in the window represents a weighty mass but is in fact fairly light. This simulacrum reminds us of the realms of reality and representation which we meander between. Not only does Dawson comment on the physical and mental weightiness of industrial heritage, but she recognises the abundance of imitative materials and cultural placebos in existence today – we're "comforted" by plastic succulents and astroturf walls, and reassured that we're "rooted" in narratives which are not of our time.

Later, I ask whether the floor-pebbles are sourced from the ocean or a riverbed – a question

provoked by the soothing sound of waves coming from a beach-scene projected on the back wall. They've been bought from a construction company. At first, this seems to be an abrupt admission of convenience, but soon becomes part of the show's intricate narrative. The mass-bought pebbles reflect our inclinations towards nature despite our existence in an increasingly synthetic world. It gets me thinking: what may seem natural can be human-made and what seems artificial can come from the earth beneath our feet.

In a film playing on the back wall, Dawson sports a pebble-print suit as she meanders down a beach in Anglesey. She wanders, much like the river of pebbles, down to the water front; her eyes fixed to the ground. In a second film, Dawson adorns a clover-printed suit as she climbs Hen Cloud in the Peak District. Both films explore acts of “memory-making” – collecting pebbles and clovers to commemorate a specific moment. In either film, we see nothing of her person and Dawson's identity is effectively overwhelmed by the hundreds of pebbles and clovers printed on her suit.

There's something nostalgic about these films – or at least a sense of longing to be with nature (or perhaps the ocean in a land-locked city) which harkens back to 18<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism. In watching Dawson scale the beach and hillside, we are moved by the sizable, dramatic landscape, which, along with her suit, nearly drowns out the artist's form. While it is a pursuit of memory and history which weighs Dawson down (her suit being an analogy for pebbles in your pocket), we can also query the dissipation of emotional and experiential value – of memory “lack” – in the mass-produced, imitative or commodity object. She wears a suit merely simulated with pebbles and cloves, and not made from the real materials themselves.

At the core of Dawson's work is a concern for material lexicons and visual metaphors. In her artist statement, she speaks of “the concept of an animal [relying] on flight swallowing an agent of weight,” as a symbolic metaphor for the show. The materials she uses have either a genuine, an imitative or a metaphorical heaviness – even the titles she uses, *Sediment*, *Bollards*, *Aggregate* and *Cement*, elude to an industrial weightiness. But then, these words and materials all drift between notions of permanence and impermanence: *Set in Sediment*, for example, appears immobile until we dissect the meaning of sediment as a deposit which shifts with the motion of water.

While Dawson speaks of the “immense weight placed on the city's industrial history,” her work suggests that this weight is not immovable. The audience can empty their pockets of memento-mori stones – whether real or artificial – and repurpose them into something other than a memory marker. The artist ends with a note on the weightiness which awaits us in the future: ebbing at the sides of the exhibition are concrete casts of disposable plastic cups. These casts are one of the show's few examples of a representation (or copy) which is physically heavier than its original source, reminding us, the viewer, of how misleading a plastic cup's weight (or rather weightlessness) can be.