

## INTERVIEW

Jonas Žakaitis talks with Lucy Skaer

JONAS ŽAKAITIS

Last night we had a friend over for dinner who at some point in the conversation told us that she struggled a lot trying to understand the last sentence in the text you wrote for your *Force Justify (Part II)* exhibition: “the installation as a whole repeats this gesture of not making it from the material world, being unable to detach in to symbolism or language”. The “it” appeared to be the problem—our friend could not understand what this “it” referred to, it just didn’t follow from the text. Not being a native English speaker either, I suggested that what you probably had in mind was “making it” as an idiom—to manage to arrive somewhere or something similar. But then I read the sentence again and realized that our friend’s reading was probably more interesting and adventurous. So how does one produce the It and what is its relationship to the material world?

LUCY SKAER

It is characteristic of my work to occupy the gap between object and representation (and to try to confound language), so this adventurous ‘it’ is at the heart of something. I did mean the idiom of ‘making it’ as in succeeding, but I’m also interested in “it” as meaning “thing”. I’ve been working recently using materials with a certain story

or history, which are themselves a combination of object and idea. For example, the reclaimed mahogany that has been underwater in a river in Belize for the last 100 years—can this history (or this internalised silent past) of the material confer meaning? Another substance I would consider in this mental category is the gold held in banks. It’s a combination of the highest abstraction and weighty ballast. So far, my production of the ‘it’ has been linked to transformation and the partial but never total transfiguring of the material world. I’m a smudger rather than a cutter.

JŽ

How do materials internalize history? I recently saw a prehistoric ammonoid fossil in Madrid’s geomining museum and realized that you can look at it in at least two ways: first, you can see it as an object that has been travelling in time, always shifting of course (from a functional device to a representation, etc.) but always having the spatial and temporal coordinates of a unit. On the other hand, it is clear that this ammonoid shape has nothing to do with either thingness or representation: it is an expression of a parametric equation spiraling around itself, an abstract function which is not in time and does not have any intrinsic relationship to any specific body. These two points of

**view seem to coexist and even amuse each other. Does your mahogany from Belize share a similar perspective?**

LS

Yes, I think so. It is also a matter of how things are described. There is a bluntness to the material world. I was thinking recently about a popular science book that makes the case for life evolving from clay particles, which form silicate crystals, which in turn break and seed new crystals. The structure is more stable than the surrounding floating particles, so it sticks around for longer. This ability to remain and to replicate is key to evolution. The book argues that this took place before life existed. I am interested in this idea of a matter in possession of agency and I've used it several times in my work in the guise of "ballast"—something that is heft with stability and momentum, but not necessarily with form. As an artist, it is part of your process to provide form, but in my work there is always a tension between blank material and specific form.

In my show 'Harlequin is as Harlequin Does' mahogany has been shaped in to geometric lozenges, similar to the way in which an emerald is cut to best reveal the qualities of the stone. In fact, I look for forms that have been emptied of meaning, or have an intrinsic ambiguity or have been arrived at arbitrarily. The material is enigmatic: it's been missing from the visible world for 100 years, and I am using it because it may emanate that darkness back. In the installation it's a structural device to stand in for the subconscious. The other objects in the room are objects I know well from various points in my life, such as my father's coin collection or a family portrait. I am using the blankness of the mahogany material (and the submerged gap in its history) as a metaphor for the unknown and perhaps unknowable. But in these

systems of representation, there is a possible falseness at play, not in relation to the origin of the wood, but in the greater assumptions made about it. I pit these materials and ideas against each other in order to prise open a space for imagination in the first hand. So the viewer is among and immersed in the contested objects. At stake are sticks and stones, rather than words.

JŽ

**Could you tell me a bit more about what you mean by this possibility of falsity?**

LS

None of the ways that I represent things are straightforward. It may have started with a kind of 'artistic license', how to tweak and invent the subject in order to make a formally successful work. But then I wanted to focus on breakdown of the truthful relationship between object and image, and have things purposefully fall in to the gap. In one of my early drawings based on a Venn Diagram, I highlighted the area shared by two images. This area is both (in this instance) a spider and a corpse, or neither. In my show at Tate Britain 'Thames and Hudson', I made an installation that attempted to be a sculpture of a publishing house, or of two rivers. It's not an appropriate subject for an object or series of objects to attempt to represent; it belongs in the realm of reproduced text and image. It represents this because I say so. The work begins in actual references (the publishing house, the rivers) and makes a series of faltering steps in to abstraction. You could either accept the work's off-logic or go against it, and I want this to be palpable in the room.

JŽ

**What do you think happens with the processes of perception (delay, generalization, abstraction, memorization and repetition,**

transposition) when they start working on the materials you are talking about?

LS

When you look at art you are making a pact to notice and interpret, which is a different relationship that one has with a normal object. I think my work takes this as a premise but alters the idea of display to upset the boundaries of where the art begins and ends. I am hoping then that the process of perception is acute and disoriented, but that the materials remain in some sense everyday. The object could be a perfect sculpture of the thought of the object in the mind, or it could be undigested, even unperceived. I think there is a kind of loop that goes round—through image, name, idea—and comes back to the first hand, to the thing by your feet or the object that is the same size as your head on the wall in front of you, that makes you also thing-like.

JŽ

What about surrealism?

LS

I am tempted to answer with just this:



Surrealist works don't function the way they once did because they are tied in to their own time. For example, Max Ernst's collages make disjunctures in scientific or industrial illustrations but don't lead

to the subconscious. This is because the source material is no longer a representation of the real, or of the conscious. But the strategy of surrealism has been heavily absorbed into contemporary advertising techniques. Nonetheless, I'm invested in some of the aims of surrealism, rather than using it as a tactic.

JŽ

Oh, the Wave Whale! Did you take this photograph in that Scottish island where you're building a house these days?

LS

No, this is trawled from the internet. I wish I had taken it though—I'll keep looking.

JŽ

How do you navigate between the good kind of foolishness and the bad kind of foolishness?

LS

I guess that is a question for all art making, although I specifically refer and use the figure of the Fool. When you step away from the literal you are in a foolish realm, that of subjectivity. As I was packing up the sculptures I made for our show—the amalgamations of shiny objects made of melted glass and bright enamels—I wondered if they would make the transition from studio to gallery, and whether the 'joke' would be a good one or something I would immediately regret when exposed to other eyes. I'm not sure there is a good and a bad foolishness; the territory itself provides a distance from critical judgment, but perhaps taking on the figure of the Fool as an identity might stop one fully or faithfully participating.

JŽ

What is the first art work you remember making?

LS

I bought used postcards from a flea market, which were originally posted 100 years ago, put stamps on them and posted them out again.

JŽ

**To people you knew or to people you wish you had known?**

LS

No, I didn't change the addresses or the message, I just sent them out again.

JŽ

**This might sound like a weird one, but when you are thinking through your works and making them, do you see your work as mainly part of culture?**

LS

I do think of and describe myself as an artist, but I am drawn to things that are not classified as art, or don't have a certain meaning—for example, ancient things that have lost their originating culture. I'm photographing the covers of Hogarth Press books, which were hand printed and bound by Virginia and Leonard Woolf in the 1920s. The wrapping papers are made by spattering paint on wallpaper, and they look variously like abstract expressionist paintings or watery patterns. But the covers are 'parasitic' to the book: they are not intended as art, and so appear in a raw state, not yet interpreted. I've used this raw state also in my works that are made in public, like the postcards, or the scorpion/diamond work I made by leaving a live scorpion and a real diamond side by side in an Amsterdam street. This appears to a lesser degree in my exhibitions, where I try to unsettle the expectations of display.

The ticket clips I used punched out holes in 16mm films are specific (like the hogarth covers) but they are devoid of attached meaning. They look like symbols

but they are just shapes, so I feel they are empty enough to be used. This empty, available quality is something that I look for. In a way, they appear outside current culture. My interest in material stems from this same place: it exhibits this specific but uninterpreted quality—now, in a different way to even 20 years ago.

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