

KETTLE'S YARD

Material Intelligence

16 May – 12 July 2009

Claire Barclay

Karla Black

Martin Boyce

Matt Calderwood

Tony Feher

Wade Guyton

Ian Kiaer

Shirley Tse

Teachers' Notes

Material Intelligence Press Release

This exhibition brings together eight contemporary artists who work with the stuff around them. Their work is characterised by a 'democratic' selection of materials, both traditional and unconventional, handled with an openness and rigour that offer insight into contemporary artistic practice and the material culture we live in and with today.

Many of the artists use mass produced materials, and used or broken objects, such as the cracked mirrors and black umbrella fabric used by Ian Kiaer in his new installation that draws together ideas about Kettle's Yard and Wittgenstein's notion of a 'family of resemblances'.

Karla Black will make a dramatic incursion in the gallery spaces with what she calls her 'thin sculpture': a 6m long 'curtain' made with cellophane, cellotape, paint, body moisturising cream, toothpaste, cling film, soap, Cif cream, nail varnish and fabric dye powder.

Claire Barclay has always made strange, crafted objects and often includes them in the large, architectural installations she is well known for. For this exhibition she focuses attention on the specific objects themselves.

Matt Calderwood will present a new, site-specific sculpture alongside two video works, and in a room-sized installation in our double-height gallery, by American artist Tony Feher.

Their choice of materials, experimental investigations and interest in the ordinary and everyday links them to some of the key artistic movements of the 20th century, including Process art, Arte Povera, Minimalism & Postminimalism, Viennese Actionism and Constructivism.

Alongside these five new commissions, the exhibition includes the UK premiere of works by Shirley Tse.

The exhibition will be accompanied by an online catalogue including video of artists interviews and downloadable texts, please go to www.kettlesyard.co.uk.

Symposium: On Not Knowing How Artists Think
29 June, 10am-4.30pm

This exhibition will tour to Huddersfield Art Gallery 1 August – 3 October 2009

Claire Barclay



Barclay often works with materials associated with craft (leather, corn dollies). She learns the skills for working with these materials, but feels she lacks the polish of a professional craftsperson. The rougher finish of her inexperienced hand is an intended part of the finished work. Barclay is also interested in the functionality of objects. Often, her installations give the appearance of having a practical function, although it is impossible to pinpoint exactly what that function may be. She previously cast found objects and then moved on to making objects that looked as though they had been found. Barclay's installations are site-specific, so they are created for a particular location and do not readily transplant to another space.

Questions

How important is the display of Barclay's work? Would it matter if her work was on the ground? On a shelf? In a corner?

What is the difference between art and craft? What qualities of each does Barclay have in her work?

Karla Black



Black works with a range of commonplace materials. For this exhibition, she has divided a gallery room with a curtain of cellophane. Pockets along the bottom of this curtain are filled with hand creams and lotions that she uses in her everyday life. She describes this series of works as 'thin sculptures'. Black is aware of the cultural connotations as a woman artist working with the materials of the beauty industry, but there is no direct political critique to her practice. The act of making is very important for the artist; she does not like the state of the materials to change (for example, paint dries and changes colour). By adding Vaseline, the paint always stays wet, as it was when she made it, which keeps the work in a time-suspended state. Aware that it is important to give the unconscious scope to influence her ideas, Black allows ideas to happen by not trying to control the outcome too closely.

Questions

How does Black divert from traditional ideas about sculpture?

What effect does the division of the curtain have on the room?

Martin Boyce



Details of Suspended Fall, 2005

Boyce draws on 20th century design and urban architecture, rather than the visual arts, for inspiration. For the work in the exhibition, he purchased Arne Jacobsen chairs over e-Bay then carved, sawed and reassembled them to create mobiles that are a playful echo of the work of Alexander Calder.

“And alongside modernism, you have this ethos of modernism - democratic, mass-produced, that edged toward a sort of utopian vision. I've been thinking a lot about the notion of utopias, and the way we can create them for ourselves, the way you create a space for yourself, whether that's a physical space, a psychological space or an emotional space that you could describe as a utopia.”

<http://www.btinternet.com/~jack.mottram/test/boyce.html>

Jacobsen was a Danish designer who created iconic chairs, such as the Egg Chair and Swan Chair, during the 1950s. Boyce has worked with Series 7 - Model 3107 chairs. Calder was an American sculptor who is known for lifting sculpture off plinths by creating mobiles and working with wire to make 3D drawings.

Questions

How is a mobile different from a static, ground-based sculpture?

What other everyday items of furniture could be reduced to abstract forms to create a similar mobile?

Matt Calderwood



Untitled, 2008

Calderwood's video installations often depict the artist's physical interaction with materials that are pushed to breaking point. Whether he is jumping on wine glasses until they break or burning ropes that suspend a car battery over his hands, the viewer is immediately drawn into the work, not least out of curiosity to see how it turns out. Calderwood uses the frame of the video image very deliberately, cropping the action so that we can only infer what is happening off-camera. He is not just filming the performance, but using the screen to add another layer to the final artwork.

The tension that we feel watching these films carries into the tension between the objects in his carefully balanced installations. The new work he is creating for the exhibition is held in the door niche by the force of one object pushing against another. It also has a precarious quality, as though it could fall at any moment, which is part of the thrill of the work.

Questions

What is the relationship between the objects in Calderwood's installation?

What role does the gallery space play in thinking about his work?

Tony Feher



*Untitled (Tape Installation),
2006*

Feher is an American artist who works with the leftover bits of our consumerist culture. Collecting found plastic bags and bottles, glass jars, crates and marbles, he builds installations, sometimes suspending or stacking objects. By re-presenting the detritus of everyday life in the gallery context, Feher is giving us new ways to think about what makes a sculpture, the aesthetic qualities of commonplace items and the larger social issues of mass consumption and recycling. Feher has created a site-specific work for this exhibition, completely transforming the double-height gallery space by suspending a wave of water-filled plastic bottles in the middle of the room, surrounded by hot pink squares dotted over the walls and a pool of blue foam in a plastic bag at one end. The colours and arrangement of objects riff off each other, creating a total environment in that space.

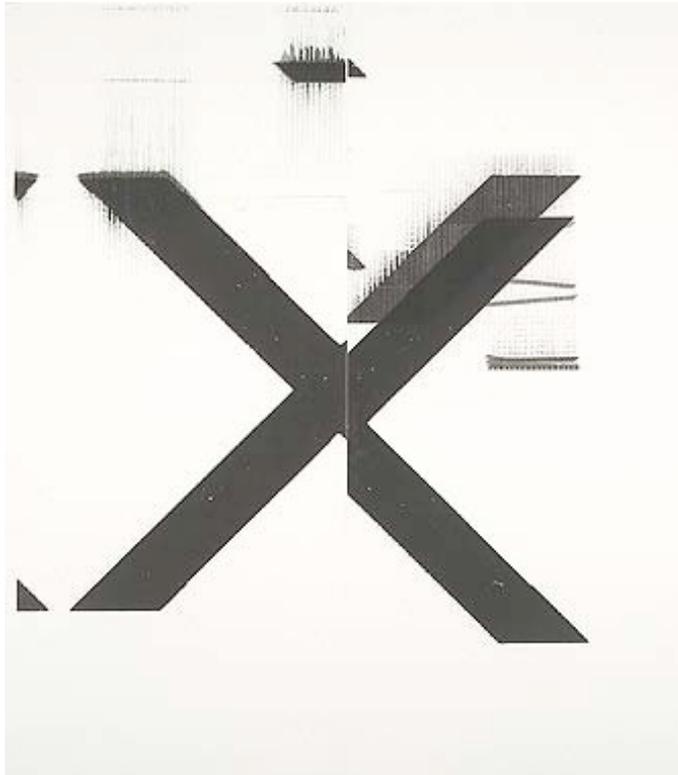
Questions

Do you think this room needs anything else in it –why/why not?

How does this room feel different from the rest of the gallery?

How do the colours and shapes interact?

Wade Guyton



Untitled, 2006

Guyton works on canvas with ink, but without applying traditional painting techniques – he feeds canvas repeatedly through an inkjet printer, folded and creased so that the canvas itself takes on a sculptural quality. Like Feher, Guyton is drawn to the everyday and commonplace, particular the ubiquitous use of a limited number of fonts in print media, such as newspapers, advertising and websites. His selection of a single letter of the alphabet is also intentional.

Chance plays a key role in Guyton's practice, as he cannot predict exactly how the printer will affect the canvas. Introducing a loss of control over the final image was a popular idea in 20th century art practice, most famously applied by Dada and Surrealist artists to liberate the unconscious. Guyton however is giving over an element of control to a machine, obviously external to himself. The image does not have the hard-edged quality of a machine-made image; smudges and blurring keep a 'human' element in the final work.

Questions

How many different connotations does X have for you? (for example – buried treasure on a map)

Why has the artist misaligned the X along the vertical axis?

Why has the artist allowed the smudges and imperfections?

Ian Kiaer



*Wittgenstein
Project/Skolgen (2003)*

Kiaer's installations are not only responses to the found and handmade objects with which he works, but also to his interest in philosophy and ideas. He arranges objects with sensitivity to the spaces between the objects – creating a balance and tension, which is not dissimilar to how Jim Ede arranged his collection in the Kettle's Yard house. Kiaer's new work for this exhibition has taken direct inspiration from Ede's *A Way of Life*. The limited palette of black and silver refers to the photography used in the book. Colour is very important in Kiaer's practice and is often the unifying element between disparate objects in an installation. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is crucial to Kiaer's thinking about these installations, drawing on the idea of 'family resemblances' – that objects seemingly joined by one common feature may actually have several overlapping similarities but no one feature shared by all.

Questions

What links the elements in Kiaer's installation?

How is the arrangement of objects important for understanding the work?

What other factors influence our responses?

Shirley Tse

Algorithm Broken By a Bullet, 2007

Tse only works with one material – plastic – in many forms, including polyethylene and polystyrene. Plastic was a new technology immediately following the Second World War, and was filled with potential for artists such as Naum Gabo (you can see his sculpture in the Kettle's Yard house on the piano). Gabo worked with Perspex and nylon thread, breaking away from the dense, heavy qualities of stone and bronze to create transparent sculptures that seemed to float on air. Tse pushes plastic even further, melting, stretching and twisting it, exploring its broad potential. Plastic has many negative connotations and can act as a short hand for artifice, mass consumption, globalisation, global



warming, etc. Tse prefers a more subtle reading of the relationship between the natural and the artificial, drawing on her childhood in Hong Kong:

“If the ‘artificial’ as the ‘unnatural’ reflects Westerners’ hang ups on the nature/culture binary, wouldn’t it mean something different for us who don’t see such a binary?... New generation Asians were born into a technologicalized society, so technology and its artificial products are our culture. Artificiality for us is better understood as an intensification rather than a copy, an enemy or a substitution”.

Source: *Global Babel: Questions of Discourse and Communication in a time of Globalisation*, edited by Samir Dayal and Marueritte Murphy.

Questions

Does the artist have a clear outcome in mind when she works with plastic – why/why not?

What cultural associations does plastic have for you?

Key Ideas

- Thinking through doing – how does one explore ideas that cannot be articulated with words, but actions? Not all artists start with an abstract idea and look for visual means of expressing it; some artists are interested in the materials themselves and through trying out different ideas, learning how the materials respond, their artwork develops. This approach is akin with kinaesthetic learning.
- Chance – Guyton, Black and Tse all leave room for unexpected elements to appear in their work it develops. They encourage a certain loss of control over the outcome, which encourages new, unanticipated outcomes, possibly better than anything planned.
- Functionality – Boyce removes the function of chairs, Barclay suggests function when there isn't any, Feher use objects that once had a function. By taking everyday objects (face cream, masking tape) out of their usual context, their original function is removed, which leads to the question – what is their function now?
- 'Democratic' use of materials – a hallmark of the artists in this show is that they break from traditional art materials, such as marble, bronze, paint, etc. and instead look to their immediate environment for inspiration.
- Modernism with a twist – Modernism is the umbrella term for a collection of 'isms' that span the first 70 years of the 20th century. Key trends are a belief in progress and an optimistic look towards the future. The 21st century is still combing over the ashes of these ideas but presenting them for a contemporary audience. Boyce's mobiles and Guyton's inkjet canvases are both examples of works that are re-examining modernist ideas.
- Links with the house – Naum Gabo exploited the potential of new materials, such as Perspex, which links with Tse's use of plastic. Jim Ede's arrangement of objects and sensitivity to space are similar in approach to Kiaer's installations. Nicholson and Wood scoured the surface of their canvases to break up the surface, attending closely to the materiality of the canvas. Found objects, be they trouser legs, pebbles or discarded broom heads, all to be found in the Kettle's Yard house, are the predecessors to the found objects that contemporary artists work with.

To Do

The beauty of an exhibition of artworks that champions everyday materials is the ease with which similar materials can be used in the classroom.

- Run a recycling art project, creating installations inspired by Feher's work. Fill plastic bottles with coloured water, suspend them from the ceiling, stack glass jars, take the installations outside and position them in a natural environment, photograph the installations in a number of different sites.
- Cover a window with tape, pale enough to let the light through, or create different coloured screens with cellophane to experiment with how the mood, temperature and atmosphere of a room is changed just with colour. Look at colour theory, colour wheels, mix colour with light.
- Fill small plastic bags with creams, toothpaste, cleaning gel, anything in the bathroom cupboard and see what colours can be created and how these squat sculptures can be displayed.
- Use a photocopier to repeat an image. Alter the image, then copy, then alter that image, then copy. What happens when you photocopy a screwed up piece of paper? (on the copy-screen, not fed through the machine!). Which font to use? Which letter? How can you introduce chance and happy accidents to the process?
- Make a mobile out of defunct objects from around the home. Pull the objects apart and re-configure them to make something new.
- Make a door niche sculpture like Calderwood's, which has to stay up only through the pressure it exerts on the walls.
- OR – have available a varied selection of materials and just allow pupils to play – see what happens...