

Human Conditions of Clay

19 March – 7 May 2022

**Pio Abad, Jonathan Baldock, Oliver Beer, William Cobbing,
Shawanda Corbett, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ryan
Gander, Antony Gormley, Nancy Herbert, Lubaina Himid,
Rachel Kneebone, Lindsey Mendick, Zoë Paul, Tal R, Renee So,
Francis Upritchard and Ai Weiwei. Curated by Deborah Smith**

Human Conditions of Clay explores how humanity is expressed through the material use of clay – artworks that carry a human trace and presence. The artists in the show demonstrate the dynamic use of clay through the manipulation of material and presentation – from installation, animation and works on paper to sculpture, photography and video performance – in conveying their lines of enquiry and interests in history, current affairs, human behaviour, folklore and tradition.

Putin, Sushi, Tea and Cigs (all 2020) are autobiographical sculptures by **Lindsey Mendick** that take on particular significance in light of recent world events. The works are inspired by the intertwining stories of a female writer, depression, and Russian control. When she was eighteen, Mendick had a nervous breakdown, left art school and returned to her parental home in North London. Agoraphobic and insomniac, seeing visions from her window of men in black on walkie talkies, she discovered that their neighbour, the Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko, had been poisoned. These works narrate this episode: *Cigs* depicts the artist cautiously peering out of her window, watching the spies; *Sushi* shows Litvinenko having lunch atop a pile of fish at the sushi bar where the first attempt to poison him occurred; *Tea* is a teapot adorned with a golden penis and refers to the second (teatime) poisoning attempt and the strip club the poisoners visited afterwards. In *Putin*, the namesake of the alleged executer is illustrated with his head open to reveal the artist having a panic attack in her bathroom, her only safe haven.

Working primarily in sculpture, **Rachel Kneebone** embraces the unpredictable nature of her chosen material of porcelain and the firing process – its delicacy, visceral and transcendent manifestations, are often unpredictable and push the boundaries of material. In *Whirl* (2017) Kneebone captures the fragility of the material and movement of rapid swirling, round and round, using interwoven motifs such as tendrils, folds, ribbons and spheres to accentuate motion and fluidity.

Zoë Paul's *Our Bodies, In Fragmented Gesture* (2019) is an oversized hand-crafted tapestry made of individual tiny beads that have been fired at different temperatures to create a range of earthy brown, white and dark blue hues. The beads are weaved into an allegorical figurative scene that portrays male and female naked figures. Paul's drawing looks to explore space through the physicality of our bodies and, through working in clay, creates a three-dimensional space.

Ai Weiwei applies his own artistic and creative techniques to the traditional material of porcelain. *Porcelain Vase (Crossing of the Sea)* (2017), depicts, across its glazed surfaces, painterly images of tragic human displacement, trauma, and suffering of sea-crossing refugees. In painstaking detail *Remains* (2015) presents an excavated group of bones found at a labour camp operated under Chairman Mao's regime in the 1950s. This secret archaeological dig uncovered the remains of an unknown intellectual who died under similar circumstances to those in which the artist's father was 're-educated' in a labour camp.

Antony Gormley's practice explores the nature of the space a human-being inhabits. In *Blanket Drawing I* (1983) the place in which a body has occupied is defined in china clay slip, removing the physicality of the body itself.

The ancient sixteenth-century technique of Japanese raku firing is explored in **Tal R's** *Scholars Palace* (2015). There is volatility with this process – in firing, the oxygen is drawn from the clay leaving the surface blackened due to the intensity of its exposure. What emerges is a beauty in organic form, shaped by history, of what Tal R describes as his 'stone clouds'.

The excavating of narrative through auction catalogues for **Pio Abad** reveals private histories of public people. In *Notes on Decomposition, No. 2* (2019) Abad's series of drawings in ultramarine blue India ink, represent the twenty-four Chinese porcelain vases that the Lehmann Brothers auctioned off, two years after the collapse of their infamous holding company.

Within **Oliver Beer's** *Resonance Vessels (British Quartet)* (2021), a collection of family objects comes alive as the acoustic memories of the inside of each vessel is amplified, emitting a sound inherently determined by the object's specific volume and geometry.

Shawanda Corbett's practice explores different cycles of human life through cyborg theory, to question what constitutes a complete body. She uses her perspective as a woman of colour with a disability to root theory into reality. The photographs *It was just yesterday* and *Now go around the corner and get your brother* (both 2021) are part of Corbett's interdisciplinary practice where she places herself central in

the work, masking her face in clay slip streaked with gestural lines, paying homage to the silent films of the 1920s and 30s, in particular to Buster Keaton, whose deadpan expression earned him the nickname 'The Great Stone Face'.

Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service (2007) is a collection of old decorative ceramic plates, tureens and jugs, purchased around Lancaster, and overpainted by **Lubaina Himid** as a chance 'to tell a new story while still being able to hear the echoes of the old one'. Himid's work awakens our consciousness with memories of slave servants, sugary food, mahogany furniture, greedy families, tobacco, and cotton fabrics, and mixes them with British wildflowers, elegant architecture and African patterns: 'On every tureen the faces of the unknown and unnamed black slave servants ask to be remembered.'

The wall-based drawing of *Venus of Valdivia* (2019) by **Renee So** is made up of multiple tiles in a palette of rusty colours and depicts two big-haired women inspired by the historical Venus figures from Valdivia, fertility totems known for their signature elaborate hairstyles. Two new traditionally coiled vases *Untitled* and *Woman* (both 2021) reference several genres of prehistoric art and pottery. One representative of Venus with the hairstyle of pre-Columbian figurines, of Chinese Neolithic tripod pots, is a fully functional sculptural vessel; the other is a fertility idol, incorporating the clitoris into the figure, whose sole function is pleasure.

In the video *Long Distance* (2018) by **William Cobbing**, performers blindly manipulate raw clay that covers their heads. The bodies linked by the clay repetitively stroke, pummel and probe,

in the attempt, to form a fixed shape, without conclusion.

Humour and playfulness oozes from **Jonathan Baldock's *Maske Series*** (2019–2021) of two-dimensional ceramic faces. His use of rectangular forms presents a seriality to the work emphasising difference to the sculptured personalities that we encounter hanging side by side. Masks of bright colours and outlandish facial expressions in which ripples of clay suggest folds of skin and cuts and bulges reveal characteristic features such as ears, eyes and noses.

Nancy Herbert's colourful ceramic and knitted masks are echoes of traditions of rituals and ceremonies inspired by her heritage of Celtic and pagan histories and the lived experience of indigenous art of Canada, and it's Inuit communities.

The figurative sculptures of *Four Dead* (2017), *Hot Future* (2018), *Erarod* and *Grumpy Grumpy Grumpy* (both 2019) by **Francis Upritchard** represent the 'accoutrements of humans', made to avoid categorisation, 'these are sculptures: things without spirit self'. These signature Upritchard bodies made from a variety of material and polymer clay, are brightly coloured and adorned in traditional clothing from around the world.

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Dark Side of the Moon (2017) by **Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg** is a stop-motion animation using clay vignettes with mesmerising music. Twisted fairy tales are seamlessly intertwined to tell the story of the moon and other protagonists set in a glade forest around a hut, a mystical Black Lodge which only certain people may enter: 'Ruminating on fear, dreamtime and memory, the film goes beyond mere urge or infatuation, to encompass loves lost and the yearning for those formative experiences of youth'. The film is accompanied by *Who am I to Judge, or, It Must be Something Delicious* (2017), which features a cast of characters whose surreal antics speaks of excess and vulnerability, pain and ecstasy, otherness and belonging.

Ryan Gander's *Making Time* (2021) is a vending machine that dispenses objects at a cost of £10. The machine contains handmade porcelain stones that explore the economies of time, money and attention. The stones are embossed with longitude and latitude coordinates, ISBN10 or ASIN identifications and numbers identifying historically significant dates.

Human Conditions of Clay is curated by Deborah Smith and commissioned by Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff.

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