



SOUTH LONDON
INFINITY PROJECTS
Present
ARTIST IN RESIDENT
MARK
KESSEN
co-starring
LINSEY YOUNG
ROSE DE DORMAN
MUD MUSEUM



LY: Tell me about the work you've been making for this residency, do you have to make a certain kind of work because of the scale of the house and the kiln?

ME: No it's more that it's an opportunity to make work that i don't normally have. The way I work is quite nomadic, I usually make work because I get asked too, I don't normally have the opportunity to make work at my own place.

LY: You don't have the equipment in your studio?

ME: I don't have a regular studio, I can't afford to have one all year so last year I had one in order to produce work for specific shows. I was commissioned to make work for a wood fire kiln project at CASS Sculpture Foundation and there were two shows that resulted from that Rough Music (at CASS) and Wasters (at Edel Assanti), I also used that kiln to produce work for a show at Lychee one and was commissioned to make a light work for Studio Leigh, so I make work when I get asked to make work. I use the environment and facilities at my disposal. Earlier this year I was in at the Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop studio using metal, because that was available. I hired a studio for 6 months last summer to make work for those shows then once that was over that was it .so this is another opportunity to work in this way again.

LY: Do you draw? Or is it all object based?

ME: It's all object based and all intuitive, very few drawings, Many will come out of something made before. I'll do a drawing of a work I might have tested. When I have a studio I will concentrate on the work I'm making for the commission and at the same time I'll make work that's intuitive and experiential and then those experiments go on to be a bigger body of work. The experimentation I did last year has gone into the work for this show.

LY: Do you consider yourself a sculptor?

ME: I consider myself an artist

LY: But is it about craft? Or fine art sculpture?

ME: It's more related to sculpture because spatial awareness is a key element with the objects as well. It's about a lot of things, assembly... The assemblment

RR: but it's about making things as well isn't it? In a sculpture sense.

ME: If you're someone who wants to make lots of things then sculpture is probably the most natural outlet you can have for that there's also a shorthand that we (RR and ME) probably both use. Why buy something when you can make it yourself?

RR Unless you find it at the car boot:)

LY Do you think of Ruskin ceramics (large scale ceramics studio in Birmingham being developed by Mark) as a work, it seems like it to me, a major project, it has the same ethos as the physical work you're making.

ME: Yeah it all feeds in it's a philosophy. About making something from nothing and finding emotion that you can be intuitive with, its a push pull. But essentially the Ruskin ceramics is a way for me to work 12 months of the year and engage with other people who work in a similar way, regardless of aesthetic.

RR: is the Ruskin ceramics a pottery or is it an art studio for ceramicists?

ME: It's a place for correspondence and communication, trying to find a way to communicate with each other, artists who don't have the opportunity to do that often. Clay is a good way to get out a fast message, it's a good way of framing the time that you use clay in a short hand way. That was the appeal when I first got into ceramics by accident. It's a fundamental skill, when you go to the beach you make sandcastles and there's no difference between that and what you might make out of clay.

LY: Do you think that's true?

ME: I think there's a direct correspondence between that time when you just make something with what's around you but the trouble is you lose that the older you get but you go on a beach and you do it. I think there's a lot of everyday creativity that we don't recognise, it's that notion of having stuff, having material around you being able to pick it up and assemble/construct it in such a way that it does something.

LY: Which is a luxury, you have to have time and space. If you're a nurse and your travelling 3 hours into London because you can't afford to live in London you're probably not going to make a sculpture.

ME: Yeah you're right, it does offer time and space I don't always appreciate time and space because guess I'm so used to having access to studios and knowing how to use them that it just comes.

LY: And also having been to art school and knowing that it is a legitimate activity

ME: One thing about art school is that it teaches you how to use a studio and how to use time and space, if you leave art school without knowing how to use a studio, time or space then you've missed an elemental part of the process.

LY: And there's time inherent in ceramics, I was bored by the time the things Roby and I made came out of the kiln

ME: You can't rush it. If you give that opportunity to people who don't normally have that it adds another layer into their lives so they can be more considerate so either they go back into doing whatever process they used to hopefully they will have a new angle on it. It's kind of like me curating this show (division of labour) in that I think I look at art in a different way when I'm doing it which I think is really beneficial for me.

LY: you mean consciously standing out with your role as an artist, you try and detach your knowledge about how something has been made?

ME: Always, I always try to find a new position for myself with whatever I do, otherwise you always occupy the same position over and over again and it becomes about engineering that position for your benefit and I'm not terribly interested in that which is why I like working with people like Grizedale which is always quite funny... At what point do you approach it and how useful are you? That was a major part of the kiln project with Roby last year, we built the kiln and we made work for other people. I think it always needs to be about perspective and shifting perspective, looking at where you stand. That residency I'm going to do in the Lake District (doremifasolatido) for a week, it's about meeting a bunch of people you don't know and setting up a dialogue, being in a different position.

LY: the other thing I like, that I've noticed is the forced labour of your work and ceramics generally. You have to know how it works, you have to clean out the kiln, you have to wash up the tools - and know how they work to start with.

ME: You have to graft, but I think one of the fundamental things I've learnt in the last few weeks and when we did the wasters show at edel assanti, when you're an artist, when you're making, that's your happiest time. When you're thrashing it out and you're sweating. You go into the studio and it's freezing cold so you just work. You get cold if you stand still and you don't want to be cold so you just work. Then you put everything together in a show and you see the fruits of your labour, over the six months or so that you've been firing the kiln. You see all this energy and then there are different questions about how the works framed and how it's perceived. You can't be lazy with ceramics.

LY if you think something's shit do you smash it?

ME: There's no such thing as a bad ceramic

RR: i smash it.

ME: but say you make 100 works in a year you can't just destroy them. Usually once a year I'll go down the tip and throw away old sculptures I don't use, stuff that's broken...

RR: but even if you don't like something you might keep it around, if there's something there that maybe didn't work but it's interesting and it leads to change.

ME: I've noticed by visiting a lot of artist in the last month that people will only make work for exhibitions that is, there's no speculative making whereas with what we do there so much speculative making.

LY: ongoing research

ME: ...and ongoing experimentation at least. I think that's where the assemblage of objects comes in, I remember there was that big table I was making? There were about 20 objects on that, it was like an album, like an EP rather than a 45, a compilation. Like a rough trade compilation. Andy knows that I'm talking about

AS: in what context?

ME: C86

AS: Something that defines a time but only because it's in the context, of them framing it

ME: yeah framing it, I think the wasters show was framed around the kiln.

AS: C86 was named by a journalist wasn't it

LY: the pastels? Shoegaze?

AS: sort of, but it only worked for a certain amount of time it was a temporal thing, it hasn't really stuck. It's not like defining a genre like shoegaze it was what became shoegaze but it's more about specific boundaries.

ME: you can do that with anything if you post-rationalise it. At the time it's hard to define a movement but 5 or 10 years later it's easy. No one really knows what they're doing at the time you've just got to go with it.

LY: what would be the defining characteristics of the work you've made for this show.

ME: I guess I've been interested in gesture, in what you can do with ceramics. I've stopped being so reliant on glaze. The surface decoration or the patina is really important. I learnt that from the CASS wood fired project. You don't have to put on really thick glazes to get a really nice effect. You can be more subtle so I think the works I've been making reflect that, they're more intuitive, gestures of knuckles, also cracking the clay. The texture of hessian, these things have been important. The making of work that is more technically demanding but still being intuitive. The big vase work could have failed at any time but I still treated every piece of clay that went on as if it were really important. But I think you can only do that with time and space and that's what this offers. Working here offered that.

LY: It might not be relevant but I'm asking because I didn't know about them and they interest me, the Handbags.

ME: from the Marcelle Joseph show?

LY: yes, can you tell me about them. It didn't feel like a subject matter that I would put next to you.

ME: I'm quite into jewellery and I got this idea to do 'jewellery for buildings' so the gherkin would have a massive sovereign and the shard would have an earring (top of ear lobe, through cartilage) That's quite a vast thing but I was also looking at how women hold bags as a symbol of power.

LY: that's about class isn't it

ME: I find it a fascinating thing

LY: it's a class issue, think about Ladies day at Ascot, all the negative commentary about working class women dressing or enjoying themselves in a particular way and there was a while maybe 10 years ago when the way women wore bags was a big thing, when the chloe lock bags came out, magazines like heat were new and there was a sense that holding a bag in the crook of your arm, that gesture was somehow aspirational. It was definitely not an upper class thing it was working class appropriation of an idea of how the upper classes behaved.

ME: there's a timbre about that, a subtle difference between the way different people do things, I thought this about the bags that the subtle gestures could be used as a form of language. Curatorially it didn't really land where I wanted it to land, it was a bit lost but at that time i'd just finished at the RCA so I was wanting to further myself from my RCA work.

LY: but this issue of class and politics being present in the work, I wonder how you feel about that. My introduction to you was through this super charged political moment that we have all lived through and was made very intimate by the fact we were all living together. I know that everyone around this table is very left wing and very politically outspoken but I wonder if you feel able to express that in relation to the work?

ME: I would struggle to understand how the work is political

LY: really! You don't think you highlight a working class position?

ME: maybe but I think it's more in the way it's framed, how do you get a political sense from an object, how do you charge it up? It's in the framing. Sometime I think that work that is deliberately political is contrived but I don't really occupy that space in the way I used to

LY: but i think you're a deeply political person you can't detach that from your work

ME: I'm not trying to detach it. I'm political on social media and when i talk to people.

LY: the very fact that ruskin will be in birmingham is political. We're constantly talking about encountering awful people in the arts in london who think this city is the only place in the UK where people make art. And you're insisting on staying in birmingham, that's hugely political act.

ME: yes that is but i don't see that individual sculptures are. This is the other thing about doing the show this week i've been looking at work and thinking what does this sculpture represent? And what do you represent as a person and when you look at my own work i think it's difficult to tell. But that's what's interesting about working with other people alongside you, gaining their perspective. But i can locate myself in a political position and i am happy to do that, there are things i wouldn't do but in terms of the actual object you can be more clever, the way you locate yourself and frame your activity is something that i can control. And talking to other people, if i don't do that i end up making work that i don't really enjoy. Deliberate political art works are usually quite dry but if you look at yourself in a position it speaks more loudly, like Theaster Gates, his gestures are way more political than his work. He sells his work in white cube probably too big collectors yet he redistributes that wealth into a low income area in chicago. I find that more interesting, essentiality that's what I want to do,

Linsey Young, Mark Essen, Robert Rush and Andrew Smith
July 2016

Thanks to
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