

In the Window: A Story of Brody Chipchase and Isobel Finlay

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Marsha Bradfield

How to tell the story of *Brody Chipchase and Isobel Finlay*? To begin with this exhibition brought together two bodies of ambitious practice, both produced by alumnae of Fine Art at Camberwell College of Arts, and occasioned by their well-earned accolades. Chipchase was the winner of the 2019 David Troostwyk/Matt's Gallery Studio Award and Finlay received the Vanguard Prize the same year. Based on their recent activity, each artist is en route to establishing their own consistent but complementary artistic presence, one which seems to speak to and bear the influence of sculpture as a practice for making new worlds. These take shape in *Brody Chipchase and Isobel Finlay* through an unlikely combination of materials and myths.

There is something deeply familiar, almost uncanny, about the imaginary world that Chipchase makes and displays at the behest of a mysterious race. Who or what are these beings, and what inspires their curious objects? Why adorn them with charms? And what about their use? Are these objects gifts, peace offerings, vessels for day-to-day activity, ceremonies or something else?

The blobs of salt dough notwithstanding, the plaster parts look good enough to eat. They appear to be made from Lebkuchen cookie dough and covered with a heavy layer of icing. It's nice to think the synesthetic combination of flavour, texture and colour may symbolise sheer potential and our ability to differently regard what we normally take for granted.

Chipchase has noted a pragmatic turn that shaped the making of this work. It can be captured in the simple but compelling motto, 'Use what you have'. The artist went to her kitchen, turned on her oven, threw open her cupboards and began working through her stores. Combining dry goods and moisture, she baked and baked and baked some more.

Fast forward several months and this image of Chipchase flying through her flour is replaced by another. It shows the artist placing her experimental outcomes back into storage. Only now instead of kitchen cupboards there are custom crates. Remarkably practical, these wooden boxes protect the artworks during transport. They also serve as plinths, elevating the sculptures off the floor of Chelsea Space, making them more visible.

The crate-plinths have symbolic value too. They evoke the hallowed world of museums, replete with their complex cultural charge. For all we know these artworks and their system of storage and display could be votive offerings to Western civilization in decline. As such they're a poke in the eye to the archaeology of cultural value preoccupied with its own heritage and conservation in the face of climate crisis, disaster capitalism, the collapse of democracy, systemic racism and so much more.

Finlay's reference to these wicked problems is also oblique in her two artworks on display. The artist puts the body's experience at the centre of her practice. Working with mesh, 'meshworking' if you will, plays a central role in this regard, with Finlay using her own body to create these forms as bodies to be encountered by other bodies, the audiences of her work. One of these forms featured in the exhibition is made from crocheting that is soaked in wet plaster and then hung to harden with dramatic effect. The resulting sculpture looks like an old world doily crossed with a 3D graphic from an meteorological computer programme. *Vortex* protrudes from the gallery wall as if pulled or

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perhaps pushed deep into space by a powerful and increasingly concentrated force. For all its formal presence, there is sparse evidence of the historical research informing the conceptual significance of Finlay's distinctive approach. This absence may be analogous to the gaps in her meshworks as they distribute both the artwork's physical weight and its cultural associations.

The craft of crocheting led the artist to the craft of chainmail. Like the former, the latter is produced through recursive gestures to manipulate material into a link that can be connected to others. What results is more than an interlocking form, one with enough flex to be worn as a second skin but is also tough enough to shield the living, breathing body below. There is a poetic asymmetry between armour protecting the body from being marked or hurt and Finlay's sense of her chainmail as a record of her body marking and manipulating the metal to create the artwork.

This movement of the artwork in the throes of becoming contrasts with the resting stillness of its display. In *Awenyddion (We Have Forgot, Old Light)*, crochet and chainmail are suspended in a sculpture that evokes ritual dress, ceremonial rites and their performance. This symbolism is cued by the artwork's production. For Finlay, the mundane labour of meshworking is a catalyst for the transcendence of self. With practice comes rhythm, muscle memory and endurance, lulling the artist into a trance-like state. Time is both lost and travelled as she works with ancient methods and materials. Chainmail dates back to the third century BC, plaster to the tenth century AD and crochet the eleventh.

This is the stuff of craft, folklore and magic. Chipchase and Finlay both nod to the supernatural while eschewing the CGI aesthetics of fantasy films and games that permeate so much contemporary life on the screen. Granted, there is something familiar about the spinning blades atop Chipchase's plaster lumps that recall the Ewoks of *Star Wars* in all their cartoonish cuteness and slapstick charm. Despite this the exhibition avoids clichéd visions of alternative communities - utopias, dystopias and others.

Another unusual alliance between these bodies of work springs from the materials they have in common. Both demonstrate ingenuity in how their makers work with plaster and metal, but there is no confusing the artworks' authorship. Placed side by side, their contrasting tones become more distinct. Finlay's reference to time/space, her reverence for history and its elegant forms, brings to mind an approach like Cornelia Parker's, albeit without the elaborate backstories. Based on work in this exhibition, Chipchase's outlook is closer to the gentle irreverence of Myfanwy MacLeod. They share a fascination with history at the intersection of sheer entertainment and serious culture where irony marks the spot.

Circling back to the question that opened these brief reflections (how to tell the story of this exhibition), anthropologist Tim Ingold offers a useful insight. We get to grips with life's dynamics not only by moving through them but also by telling and retelling stories of our lived experience. 'In such a world, persons and things do not so much exist as occur, and are identified not by any fixed, essential attributes laid down in advance or transmitted ready-made from the past, but by the very pathways (or trajectories, or stories) along which they have previously come and are presently going.'¹ I take this to mean that grasping our world as a changing place requires us to reflect on how

¹ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), 141.

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our experience is made and remade through entanglement while being actually enmeshed, always already part of something much bigger than ourselves. We are therefore shaped in conjunction with both human and non-human others: 'Where things meet, occurrences intertwine, as each becomes bound up in the other's story.'² In the case of Brody Chipchase and Isobel Finlay, the bodies of work presented here are bound by more than their occasioning, display, materials and myths. The realities of COVID-19 have entangled the artists, their exhibition and its audiences in unexpected ways. Therefore, no account of *Brody Chipchase and Isobel Finlay* would be complete without acknowledging some of the consequences of the pandemic, including for the exhibition's presentation and reception.

Fortunately, Chelsea Space enjoys active frontage. A large window opens up the interior to the surrounding area of Chelsea College of Arts, making the gallery's activity available to passersby and vice versa. In response to Covid-19 Chelsea Space was reimagined as a giant vitrine.³ Instead of walking around the artworks, visitors could experience them from outside the gallery and by looking in.

BC (before Covid) Finlay wondered if *Vortex*, with its emphatic extrusion away from the wall, would challenge how visitors negotiated the exhibition while impacting their phenomenological experience of bodies in relation. AC (after Covid), when human bodies were denied access to the space, Finlay's attention moved to *Vortex*'s morphing silhouette, its changing shadows over the day. We can think about this waxing and waning as emblematic of a moment that, for many, marks life under lockdown as we find ourselves at home, stuck in one place. Yet we also notice richer details and added layers of information when we stop and stay put long enough to really look. When, for instance, the built environment adjacent to Chelsea Space is reflected in its large window, this animates the exhibition by enmeshing the gallery's content in other scenes. Window-cum-screen, this scenario keeps the outside world *out* and the inside world *in* while creating a space where they can safely and cinematically overlap.

As mentioned, crate-plinths elevate the sculptures of Chipchase so they can be seen through the window. This highlights the challenges of installing this exhibition as a vitrine show. Each time an artwork was repositioned, the artists and curators (Clare Mitten and Donald Smith) had to exit the building to literally take a view. No doubt window dressers have developed spatial literacies that enable them to work in situ by envisioning the encounter from the street in their mind's eye. An invaluable skill, for sure; but let's hope the pandemic ends before it becomes an essential one for anyone showing artwork in a space that can be viewed through glass from the outside.

We are only beginning to grasp the devastating consequences of COVID-19, including its impact on the arts. For many, this experience has been riddled with paralysing uncertainty, overwhelming grief and other deep and discombobulating emotions. For a privileged few, the pandemic has given them much needed time in the studio - space to pause, reflect and reevaluate. Any generalisations we make about 'time spent under lockdown' have, somehow, to accommodate these and other

² Ibid., 160.

³ While using vitrines as furniture for display within exhibitions is a well-established convention, see VITRINE (London and Basil) www.vitrinegallery.com for a variation on this theme. Here, the vitrine is scaled up to an architecture of display that serves as the gallery's primary zone for offline exhibition.

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experiences while also holding space for us to tell and retell the stories of how we are coping with the so-called 'new normal'. With its thematic focus on other worlds, *Brody Chipchase and Isobel Finlay* do this symbolically by conjuring up alternatives to our current reality. In keeping with the long tradition of artists living and working experimentally, this exhibition also models a new world through its sheer realisation. We often look to artists to challenge the status quo. In the context of COVID-19 and the impossibility of exhibitions as spaces of face-to-face encounter, *Brody Chipchase and Isobel Finlay* offers a sincere and resourceful response.

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Marsha Bradfield rides the hyphen as an archivist-artist-curator-educator-researcher-writer. Her practice variously considers the subject of interdependence. This spans authorship, organisational structures and the economies/ecologies of collaborative cultural production. Marsha works with groups including Critical Practice, Precarious Workers Brigade and the Incidental Unit (formerly the Artist Placement Group and O+I). These collaborations often result in understanding that she represents in publications, exhibitions, performative lectures and other remixes. Marsha was born in South Africa, raised in Canada and currently lives and works in London, UK.