

**In conversation:**

**Michael Lightborne with Maud Cotter**

*a consequence of - a breather of air*

**ML : What kinds of materials are you currently drawn to?**

MC : This morning I was working with cardboard, some heavy assembly work, which I will grind to a finish, and light slices of the same cardboard which I have been weaving for a different work, again for my forthcoming show, *a consequence of – a breather of air*. Card endures in the work because of its elastic range of behaviour, as do the other materials I use, such as plaster, glass, steel, plastic.

I am intrigued by your use of the word drawn in the question, because I feel a pull towards a host of unexpected material moments, unintended outcomes, like gaping holes in floor covering through wear and tear, or the spill of a lathered mound of soap suds onto a yard from an emptied washing machine - material weighted with haphazard production. In this frame of mind I find myself attracted to all sorts of detritus, some of which provide sufficient depth and energy to commence a work from the point of finding - a dappled world happened like that. I am irrepressibly drawn to materials that are charged with a good deal of agency, and materials that are mercurial in nature.

**Some of your recent works seem to me to offer themselves as temporary confluences of debris and design, as if they are brittle, ephemeral balancing acts of stuff that has wound up clung together for a few moments, and yet there is a distinct rigour to the way in which the combinations are organised. It is clearly important what the stuff is, but does the dynamism of confluence matter as well?**

Very much so, I like to achieve, what I imagine is a molecular fusion, or cohabitation of one thing with another. The stream of decay in the found folds into the porosity of my making. If this combined field of material energy needs to be harnessed or directed in some way – I use an amalgam of idea and space frame sometimes, to hold it together – other times I don't need as much mediation.

The 'dynamism of confluence', (nice phrase), at root inextricably, but in appearance lightly bound together oscillate for me. I understand this process as generative moments flowing out of the object, which are gently returned, as though acted upon by a magnetic force. All material organic, and supposedly inert material are live to me, and act in similar ways. I work to intensify these relationships to show how nuanced and live things are, and how within everything we are.

I have my own interpretation of how things work, this is based on imaginings perceptions I have gathered as a practicing artist. I am interested in how physical reality is held, and what fluctuation inhabit that tentative cluster. Last week I came across a related reference by Erwin Schrödinger on such matters. He speaks of 'a device by which an object maintains itself stationary at a fairly high level of orderliness ....by continually sucking orderliness from its

environment' – this makes sense to me. I am aware of my work hovering in that space and negotiating these exchanges.

**The Shrödinger quote is very interesting, and it does feel like it captures something specific and characteristic about the energy of your works, the invisible force-field that either holds them together or is in fact instituted by their assembled presence. It also highlights their outward movement, the action by which they have an effect on the world around them. I am struck by the way that your works often appear to be consistent, self-sufficient integral worlds, serenely persisting within the gallery without need for recourse to context or concept. And yet they buzz with an energy that seems to have something to do with their relationship to the world beyond the gallery, and which also has something to do with the way that they seem to propose themselves as artefacts salvaged from some unknown culture or civilisation (the series in bell jars, for instance, signal this association most strongly).**

**As artefacts, they invite scholarly interpretation, and gesture toward alternative systems of use, languages of texture and form, histories of material culture; asking us 'what am I?', 'what is my role?', 'how have I come to be this way?'. I suppose what I am trying to get around to asking is: in what ways do you understand your works to be engaging critically or speculatively with the wider contemporary world?**

In my mind the force-field that holds things together is a primary material. I work to intensify it with smaller works and gather and hold it with larger space frame works. It exists within the assembled presence, induced and held by it at the same time. As for concept and the context, these things are indivisibly linked in my mind. Concepts are liquid to me, and find form and cohesion through making – they are to some extent the endless source of associative expression in the work and move outward in associative patterns connection with others.

So I understand my work as holding that complexity of connection conceptually and contextually, though I am curious that you point out a feeling of separateness – I must think some more about that. As to their connection with the world beyond the gallery, to me they are flexing in an almost cosmological space, a place where primary forces and energies are in play more evidently, I understand this as a parallel inner space at the same time. This prompts many questions about the nature of human interiority, psychologically, physically, how exposed we are in a changing exteriority. There is a feeling of increased exposure as other agencies such as climate change, political uncertainty colour that exteriority more intensely. In my exhibitions a consequence of, in its three iterations, I examine that rogue space using that exterior intensity as a contextual field for the work, the consequence of our uninformed interaction, our refusal to understand the long-term consequences of our unsustainable decisions. That work you mention is titled bubble, each glass dome, or bell jar, is a gather of different types of formation or consensus, fortresses we build in the face of a changed reality. It deals with interiority within an exterior world - a spill of turmoil and benevolent flux.

I wonder if I have answered all your question ....

I like your use of the word salvaged, my work pulls disparate elements and references together, so it is an eclectic mix in a different composite energy, a cohabitation in matter. It begs the question - can we not find a better way of ordering the world, with an increased level of commitment and

understanding? I hope that the work presents new cohesive ways of doing that. I think that the visual art in all its forms keeps that space of uncertainty and questioning open. My work addresses that aspiration, and contributes to the perception of new vistas into the future, through matter itself.

### **Is there a question, or an image, of 'permanence' at stake in your work?**

I am aware of issues of durability in my work, but 'permanence' – no.

The questions I play with are those of interactive process. I imagine an indivisible circular line of continuity which has no beginning or end. My work congeals into its own intensity within that cycle, playing with different ranges of material tenacity. I do, for example stabilise the cardboard I use with a water based acrylic resin, happily compatible with all known materials, so that gives it endurance and strength, though it can appear very fragile. My work exists for different time scales or are is gestural and preserved through record.

I nurture my work, and I care about its existence, so it's an emotional commitment to continuity I seek rather than the fixed condition of 'permanence'. I don't believe in 'permanence', every moment is made up of evolutionary changes – a micro field of startling inflections in which macro streams take form and inflect.

I got caught once in a sand storm in the tundra desert in Iceland, during a drawing trip. This was in 1990ish, a while ago, but a formative experience. I was climbing up the face of a volcano when the sand storm blew up. I found a small opening in the side of the volcano, just the size of my folded body, wrapped myself in a plastic sheet I had to hand, and stayed there, waiting out the storm. I was immersed in this limited sensorial environment for six hours. Millions of particles of sand filled my visual field. Every now and then I pulled back the sheeting to have a quick look. I saw undercurrents and forms rolling in the storm. This contributed to my understanding of the flow between macro and micro forms, in a much more coherent way, and that in such flux there are no fixed point. I think of this experience as an accelerated version of what physical reality is, behaviourally.

The image of permanence in the work is its ability to look at the viewer, to reveal itself and become part of their world, an amalgam of being and matter.

### **Speaking of temporality - when do you work? What is the rhythm, duration or pace of your work with these materials? Does it change from piece to piece?**

My energy fits, like most people, into a working day. I like the regularity of that pattern, of being there when things shift or present solution, so being alert to those changes is important. My concentration builds up during a body of work, like say what I am doing at the moment, so I keep down other distractions. I work slowly, I think .... not sure .... I think I give the impression of being faster than I am, perhaps because I try to put in consistent hours.

When it comes to rhythm, well I was advantaged by meeting an extraordinary artist called Andrew Montague when I was very young, eighteen. He advised me to study my creative energy, how it flowed – so I did, in an informal way. This helped me a great deal right from the start. For example, I always kept watercolours on hand for when my physical energy dipped, realising also that drawing kept my mind relaxed and nimble, a regenerative force that I held in my practice for years. I am getting back to that again now, drawing – which slipped to one side in my drive to make.

Duration comes in various forms. I have evolved a method that sometimes requires that I support the demands of larger works by bringing a series of smaller works along with it. They relieve the tension of the larger one, keeping it open for me, while at the same time they let bits of neglected associative thinking loose. My rhythm changes depending on what I am working on, so though I describe patterns of behaviour – things change all the time. New directions demand new methods of investigation. I keep an eye on the energy flow as I said – making sure that I don't burn out, that I replenish it.

Other form of duration comes from smaller works, like some things I am working on right now. They manifest themselves very slowly. The eclectic range in the materials requires time to unravel and find commonality with my associative suggestions. So I keep them close and I watch them quite a bit, so they are extremely slow and have a curious durational demand in them. I hope this depth of consideration shows in the work, and becomes itself durational as the object unfolds itself down to all those interwoven layers, its companion materials. Investing in time with a work for me is adding presence to the work, and that is very important to me.

I am interested in generative forces within work and broader cultural engagement, which has meant that I have involved myself in issues and projects that involve other platforms and forms of duration, in that the projects move on to be generated by others, like the National Sculpture Factory, for example. I also presented three projects as a response to recession one of which was the landofzero.com - a two-day seminar with evolving exhibition within the space frame set by a school.

### **Who or are your works for, and for how long?**

Being concerned with the nature of physical reality and how we can see through that to advanced collaborative systems of will and agency within matter – I think that I probably strive to serve a universal condition and audience. Travelling, and working in different countries has made me aware of the fabric of cultural differences and what Vilém Flusser calls the shared 'amorphous stew of phenomena', that underpins those variations.

I get great satisfaction from the open and fresh approach to my work from children and adolescents, not to mention the fuller range of audience who's engagement is deeply appreciated. So I guess the work is for everyone, though it is an organic abstraction rather than a defined narrative, and may require patience and time to absorb.

I want the work to hold open a space at the boundary of knowing – an edge keenly investigated and continually expanded by scientific advances. I like this edge of matter

and I like to hint at future virtualised conditions – like the moon is falling which is concerned with a reduction to low variant horizontal layering as a global condition.

How long is an interesting question – I imagine that if the space that the work holds open is relevant to future perception and behaviour, then that's the 'how long' of the work.

The work has to earn and hold its relevance and place without me.

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Michael Lightborne is an artist and a writer based in Birmingham and Cork. He works primarily with moving images, sound and print, and has exhibited work in galleries and film festivals around the UK and internationally. He is Associate Professor in Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick (as Michael Pigott), where he teaches and writes about film and video art, and relationships between sound, place and cinema.