

It's Nice That

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Paloma Proudfoot's debut UK exhibition - The Detachable Head Serves as a Cup - is as intriguing as its title

Words by Laura Isabella, Tuesday 25 September 2018



Ahead of experiencing RCA alumni Paloma Proudfoot's exhibition at the Cob Gallery we were sent an essay by the artist. Written as if hurriedly spoken, there was an urgency, a palpable energy and a visceral quality to her words. They called into question inspirations as an artist, the messy often haphazard approach to shows, how through widening our view and not shackling ourselves with a sense of how a project might be approached we can open up its possibilities. Her words, like her ceramics hit an inner point — then twist and turn us from within, calling into question our response to objects; their ability to evoke memories and the potentially heavy-hitting responses.

Paloma's sculptural ceramics draw their inspiration, then, from a plethora of events and the essence of the thoughts and feelings they evoke. From a date that went wrong; from the internal battle with what honesty means; from recollecting the specific tailoring of a Margiela trench coat and how clothing really is a second skin and what that meant. To experience Paloma's work is to feel something, to flurry your mind with questions. The key is to keep your mind open to its responses.

It's Nice That delved deeper into her first UK solo exhibition: The Detachable Head Serves as a Cup with Paloma to understand the pathways she took to create this body of work, on show at The

Cob Gallery until September 29th.

It's Nice That: Where did the show's title come from?

Paloma Proudfoot: The title came from a museum label description from one of a series of bear-shaped jugs I saw in the ceramics displays at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. I couldn't believe that these bears, which look like they are in S&M style chains and harnesses, were made in the 18th century in Nottinghamshire. I realised that it was made when bear baiting was still a legal and popular pastime and that they were novelty ornaments for bourgeois society at the time to serve guests drinks in. On the one hand I found them really funny, this group of bears with chains running from their noses staring out at me from the cabinets with their cartoon-like ecstatic eyes but also quite disturbing thinking about how this cruel blood sport had been ornamentalised. The museum label really encapsulated this uneasiness, a sense of violence (decapitating the bear) but made polite, an ornament to serve an unsuspecting guest. It was this sense of uneasiness/latent violence that I was looking to evoke in the show.

INT: You have always worked with natural materials like hair and food and wax, what drew you to do so? The result is so visceral.

PP: I do normally use natural materials in my work, mainly to offset how static and impermeable the ceramics can be, using perishable materials that age and morph over time. But in the case of this show I was actually interested in unnatural or fake materials too. The hair is prosthetic and the pearls used in the glazes for 'Clemente' are fake Swarovski ones. I was looking at the famous 18th century ceroplastician Clemente Susini's waxworks and particularly his 'Anatomical Venus', a model of a female corpse for educating medical students, which was lauded at the time as the 'ideal' representation of a corpse. It was seen to most truthfully represent the female body in the moment of death with its smoothly rendered wax surface, real human hair and pearl necklace. The use of these natural materials seemed to confer (at least at the time) truthfulness to it when in fact it is a completely idealised and overly sexualised imagining of a corpse, nowhere near to the reality of the dead body it is supposed to depict. It was this paralleling of honesty and natural materials that I was playing with. I was reimagining Susini's models as if put back together incorrectly or playing up, melting down the wax and sullyng it with the unnatural prosthetic hair, and creating these open-faced alien figures, rebelling against an enforced 'ideal' femininity with their blistered and angry glazes.

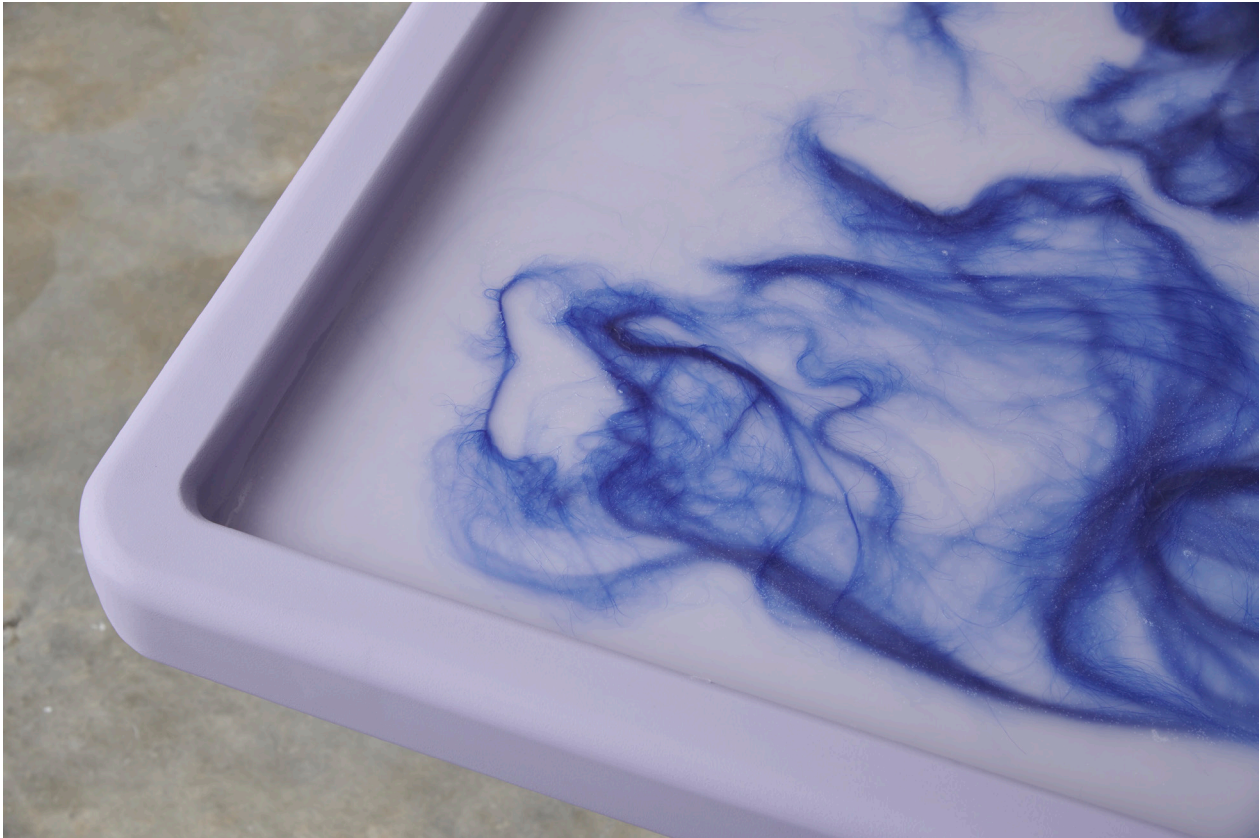
INT: There is a running theme it seems of juxtaposition within the show – differing materials, differing view points, differing interpretations of the same experiences?

PP: Yes I became really intrigued with ideas of honesty in making, what or why something is ostensibly made for or inspired by and then all the hidden or ulterior motives behind it. The Susini waxworks triggered these ideas, how they were ostensibly models to educate medical students without the need of a dissection of a real corpse, but in the way that they are displayed gripping onto silk bed sheets and adorned with pearls and perfectly curled hair, they were obviously not just a functional object.

INT: Where has this kind of friction between two sides come from?

PP: This made me think about all the differing and conflicting ideas that go into making my work, how on the one hand I'll be talking about Susini's waxworks or other influences but in reality a lot of the time I'm just following instinct when I'm making, it diverts from the original idea and becomes it's own thing and language. As well as following the materials I'm working with, ideas are always redirected by, and indistinguishable from, my mood and things I'm going through at the time, even

just on the mundane level of thinking about what I'm going to eat for lunch or an annoying date I've been on. There might have been the external influence as the starting point but other internal personal factors. It's this confusion of motivations that I hope isn't lost in the final artwork.



INT: The sculptures really put across a fascination with the human body and how it is represented. Where did this come from?

PP: When I started out making sculpture, I was obsessed with clothes making and tailoring and taught myself these skills as well as working with a tailor for a while. I'm still really fascinated by clothes and architecture as both extensions and containers of the human body, and their attempt to contain the human body as much as their failure to hold in its messiness. I was thinking about the concepts of tailoring again for this show, the way that tailors work from a set pattern block, from which they alter the shapes and lines to fit a certain client or style. For the works in the Cob show I used these pattern-cutting techniques, making paper templates and cutting these pieces from thin slabs of clay like a tailor would from cloth. I start from this position of control, but then hope to offset that with the way I combine the clay vessels with other less static materials, or by over loading the glazing with ground up glass and pearls that blister and melt in the kiln.

INT: Was this fascination developed/furthered during your time in Italy where you recently held the Thun residency?

PP: I actually visited Bologna before my residency to research the anatomical waxes and then coincidentally ended up doing a residency later in the year back in Italy so thought it was the perfect place to develop these ideas I had saved from the earlier trip. I had the opportunity to see more anatomical waxes in Florence and the anatomical theatre in Padua but it was actually going to the House of Fortunato Depero in Rovereto that really inspired me. He was a Futurist artist who designed the original Campari bottle and made their first adverts as well as making incredible paintings, furniture and tapestries. I saw this (maybe tenuous!) connection between the modular disjointed figures in his work and the anatomical waxworks with dismountable bellies and organs.

It was there that I got really excited about incorporating booted and clothed joints into the modular figures I was already making.

I also went to Swarovski Kristalwelten over the border in Austria, which is the like a Tellytubby/Disneyland but for everything Swarovski related, which is absolutely insane. The Swarovski museum there is housed within a giant turf-covered face with a waterfall coming out of its mouth, which made me think of the body on a wider architectural scale too.

INT: Are you always looking for new ways to bring together ideas and view points and materials and crafts?

PP: Yes that's what keeps me going! And why I'm always looking for new collaborators that help me see things in different ways or introduce me to new techniques. As well as my solo work I work with choreographer Aniela Piasecka and we are also part of the performance group Stasis. I have also been working with artist Saelia Aparicio on a series of collaborative sculptures. I feel so fortunate to have found such amazing collaborators and they are really the ones that keep me excited and inspired even when I'm feeling a bit drained!

Images courtesy of Cob Gallery, London. Copyright Paloma Proudfoot.