

The following conversation between Rebecca Ackroyd and Vincent Honoré, Director and Chief Curator at David Roberts Art Foundation, London, took place in August 2017.

VH: You graduated in 2015. Your work changed a lot since then. Can you explain how?

RA: I feel like last year I had a sudden feeling of complete despair and disconnection with what was going on in this country... And thinking about my work: What is this doing? Why am I doing this? What purpose has this got? What is this doing for me now at this point in history and time? I wanted to push the work into a different space and create some works that were more politically direct.

VH: How was the Outpost show political?

RA: As you entered the space there was a huge print of women's crotch, it filled the wall and had these hairy gorilla hands grabbing the crotch. I wanted it to be inescapable and become almost like a billboard.

VH: Was it referring to Donald Trump?

RA: Yes, and suddenly feeling for the first time really annoyed and angry ... well not for the first time, but I suppose it felt like all the under currents of misogyny and racism were being given the green light to be more vocal, in the UK as well. It made me feel incredibly alienated, it made me think about what I wanted my work to be doing, and how I wanted to engage. At the same time not wanting to make a practice that's about politics because for me that's not particularly rewarding. I wanted to make works that are engaging in what I'm feeling at the moment. I just felt like: 'Where am I in this situation?' In a funny way the Outpost show almost became a dissection of me.

VH: All these elements: feminism, class systems, politics merged with some clear autobiographical references were already in your work before that.

RA: It wasn't like I reinvented the work, it was almost like I just had to re-evaluate what my approach was to it, and how to make it more specific. I felt there was so much change in the space of two years that it would be disingenuous to keep making and not somehow reflect on it.

VH: This image of the gorilla hands makes me think a lot of the sarcasm present in the very feminist image of the beer exploding by Sarah Lucas... and all the sudden I have a question, something I never thought before about your work... Do you consider yourself as a British artist? Your work could be positioned in a tradition of the YBAs in many ways (from its materials to its themes), and the tradition of the punk culture, maybe.

RA: I never thought about being British, and it wasn't something I considered in my work, and then with the Brexit vote it became inescapable. In the Outpost show I wanted to make direct references to an idea of 'Britishness' by covering the floor with a pub carpet. It was very much referencing an idea of a masculine, boozing, binge drinking, cheap drinking kind of culture that's so specific to England, or a stereotype of it anyway. I wanted it to provide a landscape for the other works, that were more personal, to nestle on.

VH: Nobody ever mentioned Sarah Lucas about your work. The works are different, however you share something about the female body being exposed as a subject of desire and not only as an object of desire.

RA: Yes, I think she's someone that I've always looked at in terms of her attitude and the way she reinvents things... I was really interested in her directness because she doesn't let you escape when you're looking at her work: you're very confronted with it.

VH: She once told me that she believes a work is finished only when she can have a good laugh with it. That's something you share: humour in the work.

RA: I think that's something I let into the work through letting more of myself into it... being able to have fun with what you're making and allow it to go into uncomfortable or unexplainable territories.

VH: You are now exposing yourself more?

RA: Yes, exactly, in a way making those shutter pieces in the 'Carrier' series; using the tops of them as a place to make collage is almost like being able to put whatever content I want onto the work. So they already have a formal content, echoing an urban doorway or window, but then plastering imagery on to them gives them another layer of meaning and places them in a different space or time.

VH: Something interesting in your work is this bipolarity between opacity (like the blinds and the walls) and transparency - being able to go inside, the rib cages, being able to go through all the system of the ventilation grids.

RA: I'm interested in what you can reveal or hide in a work and how it can direct or obstruct a space or where it might lead beyond the gallery. The shutters are like full stops or ruptures in the fragility of other works, they're impenetrable. The figurative sculpture that's going to Norway, has perspex windows cast into different places in the body. It's hollow so you see through the limbs and see it's shell and it resembles a church like building while also a reclining body basking itself.

VH: Do you consider yourself a sculptor, a painter or, maybe, an architect? I am mentioning architecture, Not only because of the large sculptures the environment you created, but even when I experience one of your drawings, I feel it is an architecture, an environment in itself.

RA: When I set the work up in a show is when I can locate it within a context and build meaning, and for this the environment is key and thinking beyond the gallery. It's important for me to be able to move across different ways of making without limits so I don't really categorise what I do. I suppose it's an interest I have in transporting an object or an image beyond the realm of familiarity and into something more uncanny or uncomfortable.

VH: One can find some references... references may not be the right word but one can link your drawings to Lee Lozano or to Phillip Guston.

RA: Yes, exactly. I don't plan any drawings, they just come out and they just flow in a way. I hadn't shown them until recently and they're strange to me, as I can't explain where they're coming from or even know how to talk about them, they're so 'other' to me.

VH: Each time I see one of your exhibitions I am fascinated by the fact that my position as a viewer is not the position of a spectator, and the work is not an object. I am with a creature, with something that is living, with an organism that is moving although it is not moving. It is absolutely fascinating, the way you position the works - you miss-position them, you make them alive in a very specific way.

RA: When I install a show the process of setting the tone of the room is key in how the works are activated and where they come alive. It's as much about where I'm installing it as where I'm pointing out to, the spaces and experiences beyond. With the show at

Outpost I didn't want it to feel like a gallery, I wanted it to be dark, I wanted a carpet on the floor that was really distracting and vulgar, and located the works somewhere else to shift the environment from one thing to another. It makes me feel very uncomfortable to think about this show now because there so many weird decisions that I made, but I think that's what gives it a feeling of restlessness; it's sloppy.

VH: Funnily enough people are mentioning, when writing about your work, Louise Bourgeois and Rosemarie Trockel. I would rather refer to Sarah Lucas and Robert Rauschenberg.

RA: I guess all of those people have influences on me but I suppose I'm more interested in Bourgeois and Trockel and in the trajectory of them in the way that their practices constantly shift and morph into new territories in a limitless and unapologetic way.

VH: Bourgeois was changing her practice every five to ten years. Is that something you want to do?

RA: I don't really think about it in that way, my work will always shift and respond to what's happening around me. It's important for me that I'm making things that feel relevant to my experiences and that will ultimately always be unpredictable and changing.

VH: Do you think the exhibitions in Berlin and in Stavanger will mark a change?

RA: In some ways maybe but I think they reflect a development rather than a shift away from past ideas. The shutter works are similar to some works that I made five or six years ago but at this point in time they have different connotations, to me, they talk very specifically about now or my experiences now.

VH: Have you used black before?

RA: I used to use a lot of graphite in my work. With these works in particular I wanted them to be tonally very sombre and stripped back, in stark contrast to other works where I've used a more playful palette. For the shutters the seeming heaviness is important as I want to emphasise the end of something or the shutting down and blocking out.

VH: In your work, there's a lot of thresholds with transient moments, the keyhole, the windows, even the legs - they are oversized so you go between the legs... they are doorways...

RA: Yeah, they allow a glimpse into another time or place that I want to echo familiarity while staying on the edge of what's real. Either in the formal content or how I set the works up in a space I want there to be a sense of restlessness, or not belonging.

VH: You are basically out of the studio for the first time in a month. How do you work? Do you work every day or do need to have an exhibition to produce works?

RA: If I've got an exhibition then I work all day, every day but even when I don't I spend most of my time there. I work best by making through things so it's important to be a bit disciplined about going.

VH: Do you make the works yourself?

RA: Mostly, I have someone who does my metalwork for me but often through making I discover new processes or often things shift from what initially think they'll be. Sometimes whole bodies of work have emerged through an accident in the studio.

VH: I can see a lot of experimentations and chance going into the work, and being a major factor of creation.

RA: There are chance encounters when I'm making something and finding new processes is an exciting and important part of my work but then this is given shape and direction, so the work isn't about a process or intuition. I make a lot of things I don't ever show, ideas that don't work and get discarded because they I don't feel they say or do enough.

VH: I sometimes think about Philip Guston when seeing your work

RA: I often think about his bravery when he shifted back to working figuratively, he really carved something out for himself. The abstract expressionists' works reflect a historical movement but when you look at Guston's work, it's on a completely different level, and in a completely different world. I think I really was excited when I first saw his works.

VH: I mentioned a few artists. One can position your works in a lineage, yet they still don't know what they are.

RA: Yes, exactly. I think they reflect an openness, you need to be open enough to let things into the work and flow through it, rather than trying to confine it into being one thing.

VH: It must be terrorizing, isn't it? To create works like that...

RA: For the artist? Yes, it can be. I think that's why I don't always like talking about it, I feel like I'm about to slip up and everyone's about to realize that I have no idea what I'm doing. Even though, when I'm in the studio, I feel like: 'This is what I'm doing.' I'm so certain of it and I don't question it. I've started to understand that this is part of my process though and often not knowing means something unexpected can happen, it's the risk.

VH: Do you never retouch the work, change the work?

RA: I do sometimes if it's going into a solo show or something I might change it in the space.

VH: What about separating you from your work? Them going away, being sold or being shown in group shows without you installing them. How does it feel to let them go? I had this conversation with Miriam Cahn who told me that she was very happy for the work to go because then she could start the next process.

RA: I think that's it. I never feel that weird about it because I start making something else. I never really have a time to dwell on it but then sometimes I get a bit of heartache about letting a work go and feel like I want to keep it all, but once I'm involved in a new body of work I look ahead at where it's going next. For me the previous works act as gateways into new works and inform the next ideas it's a shifting body that doesn't sleep.



Rebecca Ackroyd | ART BERLIN, 14 - 17.Sept. 2017

Haugesundsgaten 8 | NO-4014 Stavanger
phone +47916 13 947 / +49 (0) 170 2693327 / +49 (0) 160 8500779
www.galleriopardahl.no
GALLERI OPDAHL