19.06 — 18.07.2021
SEBASTIAN JEFFORD
Natural Gas

Sebastian Jefford in conversation with **Mike Oehler**

MO: I wanted to ask you about the Medieval. Following your work, there has often been some sort of subtle nod toward it, or a material sensibility that seems to suggest ideas of what I would call a European Medieval of the popular imagination. Yet here in these new Flower works you use imagery very directly that seems to either be from or at least depict the Middle Ages.

SJ: Yes that is absolutely true, I'm no historian. This idea of a 'European Medieval of the popular imagination', as you so succinctly put it, is something in which I've found very fertile ground for some time. I find this kind of 'image' of a historical period that sprouts from the gap between fact and error particularly nourishing. Even when I was working with the imagery here, I was sure that it was all from the Middle Ages, but I went back afterwards and checked the dates and they're all from 1500 onwards. Yet in my head they seemed to embody this period entirely.

MO: So the Medieval for you is a man shitting and a pig eating his excrement? Tell me more.

SJ: Laughs
I'm not sure I'd go that far. But it does articulate a very human relationship to animals and the natural world. That image is from a series of prints by Pieter Janz Quast in which he depicted each of the five senses, this one coming from 'De Reuk' (The Smell). In my head the European Medieval is this time of an almost comically brutal materiality – a time of mud, rain, shit, damp, blood, moss, sweat, piss, boils, mead, wind (of earth and body) – it captures an idea of sensorial overdrive or something. A time before plastic, a time of mud. Now we have mud with micro plastics. Mud+.

MO: Right. This idea of Mud+ describes pretty well the odd materiality of the Flower pieces – at least they look like flowers to me. Seeing them up close the battle between the text, images and the surface becomes very pronounced – or maybe its not a battle as such but I think what I mean is the image and the surface are very much fused. The image seems to be in the ground, and it becomes impossible to ignore all these protrusions that come from the surface, what look like wires and finger/footprints, sometimes even fossils, embedded in what seems to be somewhere between clay and leather? There's a lot to say about them. They're confusing, in a generative way I mean.

SJ: On a very base material level, when I look at a screen I'm looking at a pane of glass encased in metal hiding a more complicated mess of wires and

other parts, while at the same time staring into this deep abyss of the internet. But this word ‘ground’ as you say, as in the ground we stand on, that materials are extracted from, that really chimes with how I think of these works. In some ways it seems to me this is where everything comes from, protrudes from. I’m struck by the way technology is often designed to look as though it came from the air or from space – always a sleek exterior hiding a more mangled innards, as though to distract from the fact that everything down to the microchips is mined from the earth. The image world runs on oil. Server farms, black boxes in deserts and wastelands are powered and cooled by fossil fuels – which are essentially dinosaurs and plants, compressed. The image as dirty, as a pollutant, both materially and politically is very interesting to me - perhaps ‘The Cloud’, is more of a swamp than one might think. It’s an attempt to re-materialise the dematerialised.

MO: They do feel dirty, or scuffed. As though they’ve been dragged along the floor, or really used, worn out.

SJ: Exactly, I want them to feel like they’ve been handled again and again and again. The petals being attached by the jacket fasteners suggests that maybe parts had to be replaced after too much wear and tear. To come back to the image again, I’m trying to reacquaint it with its physical origins somehow – to drag it through the mud, to age it, deteriorate it. I like to think of the digital image as being like a coin, through it’s circulation it acquires a layer of grease and filth that comes from the thumbing, swiping and fumbling of all the human hands it passed through before it got to me. Saying that, I would never put a coin in my mouth yet my consumption of images is unfathomable, I’m a total glutton.

MO: Right, I can see how this circular shape of the pieces touches on this – but I wanted to ask you where is this flower shape coming from? It seems really specific but also ambiguous. Flowers play a part in so many cultures all the over the world but for so many different, maybe conflicting reasons. In Western art too, the flower has been an inexhaustible subject for many artists. Is this something you’re trying to tap into here?

SJ: No, it became a bit more specific than that for me. I came across this shape by accident – I was just laying out these panels on the floor and then there it was – a flower, flattened, squashed. It reminded me of the way people preserve flowers, by flattening them in between the pages of a heavy book. I read later on that in the Victorian era of the UK and America ‘Flower Pressing’ was a popular pastime. People would press them between the pages of heavy books, in order to arrange them into idealised pastoral scenes. There is something odd in the idea that you have to kill something in order to preserve it, that in order for the flower to become the ultimate image of flower-ness you literally have to crush the life out it, dry it out. This seemed to say so much about what an image does and is. As I made more of the flower works I also wanted them to directly reference the buffering sign, that dreaded spinning wheel that attempts to hold our gaze to distract us from the momentary break down of data transfer. Once that wheel appears it seems to make the image and its infrastructure feel very heavy, very physical again.

MO: And they sit on these roof structures, which immediately make me think of houses, but they’re very skinny structures, with no entry or exit point. Even

if you wanted to get inside you'd have to crawl underneath.

SJ: I had read that one of the fastest growing demands of architecture is for data centres, places that house the machines where our memories, desires, conversations and data trails are stored, the backstage of everyday life. Many of these buildings are lacking in architectural qualities and to a degree are not designed for people. These buildings are often found at the peripheries, in deserts, wastelands or hidden away somewhere. I wanted to accentuate this idea of a non-human architecture to an absurd degree by making a structure that is at once immediately recognisable as architectural but at the same time not an inhabitable space: a house for images. It also strikes me as interesting that this gigantic petro-dependent infrastructure has to be hidden away, as though to not taint the idea of the image-world as ephemeral, part of the air itself.

MO: It reminds me of what you said earlier about images running on a fuel of compressed plants and dinosaurs. Maybe in these pieces they are somehow returning to their original form, a kind of cyclical reanimation. There is always this question of time in the work, or of where different scales of time might rub up against one another. Is this continued use of the circular shape in the work something to do with this, or is that too direct?

SJ: There are many references to the circular form throughout the show, often where one cyclical movement is broken down or deformed through contact with another. I'm drawn to this idea of cycles within cycles, from the micro to the macro. The tyre works do this in quite a direct way - the tyres are defunct, bald from their on-average-600-revolutions-per-mile, all those revolutions powered by fuels that are the product of cyclical process of rot and compression so slow that it is impossible for us to perceive as humans. And then, they cradle this O-shaped cereal, the end result of grains deformed beyond recognition to accommodate an appetite gradually warped over centuries.

MO: I wanted to ask about this group of works actually. It's impossible not to think about the passage of time in this room, or somewhere between the passage of, and the stasis of time. The tyre pieces are held in place by these dusty, Plexiglas forms, they feel like the discarded result of some project that never came to fruition.

SJ: Yes, exactly, the stillness of the sculpture is what lets the dust to settle and allows the passage of time to be perceived. I'm always drawn to materials that wear time on their sleeve, and Perspex does this almost too well, in that it seems to actively attract dust. These sculptures are architectural models of staircases and corridors, spaces that facilitate passage over, around or through places. Again, I was drawn to the model as a form of architecture that is not made for human physical inhabitation but a kind of mental or psychological projection, a way of peeking around the corner of time to look at possible futures. For me they embody an alternative time and space never made concrete, there is an inherent 'could-have-been' in the form, and I think this tension between the physicality of the model and its speculative yet defunct character is something I find very poetic.

MO: And the clock pieces – at first I thought they were your own drawings, but

then quickly saw the difference in handwriting on each piece, where do they come from?

SJ: The clocks show the results of a diagnostic test used to assess the stage of Dementia in elderly people. The patient is asked to draw a clock at a particular time in a blank circle. The drawings are from a study on the effectiveness of the Clock Test. I'd come across this after reading an article that suggested living in a large city in Europe could increase the chance of developing dementia in later life by up to 40%, due to poor air quality. At the same time I'd read that the storage of digital data is set to create 14% of the entire world's carbon emissions. Perhaps its a loose connection but its one I wanted to make: this idea that the very technology which I use to store my memories could be responsible for diminishing my physical capacity to make memory in later life.

MO: They're very emotional.

SJ: Yes they are.

MO: Hearing about where the work comes from it seems there are all these different starting points that become knotted together, but ultimately come back to familiar questions of time and materiality. I thought it might be good to end our conversation by asking you where these starting points come from? How do you begin?

SJ: For some reason I find this approach very productive for making sculpture, something you have to be with and experience in the round. A starting point for me when I'm making work is difficult to define, always a thick soup where perhaps disparate ingredients might change the flavour and body of the dish from one week to the next. But there are always central questions I keep coming back to – what is an image, and what effects do they have on me? Do they mislead me? Are they bad for me? Why do I consume them so readily? How do I locate the materiality of an image, no matter how convoluted or nebulous that line of flight might be? How is it that the image is now the thing that shapes me or my body, the environment, architecture, or my perception of time, space and history?