

Chronically Digressive

by Tom Morton

Let's begin with the word prop. One basic definition is a thing that holds up something else, from a wooden post supporting the roof of a mine shaft (a pit prop), to a burly rugby player who shoulders his smaller teammate's weight in the front row of a scrum (a prop forward). Then, of course, there are theatre props, known more formally as 'theatrical properties', a phrase that originated among companies of strolling players in Medieval England, to refer to their common ownership of the paraphernalia of their trade. Props of this type may be physically indistinguishable from their off-stage counterparts (a whiskey glass that features, say, in a production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*), or cartoonish parodies of them (think of the strings of bright pink plastic sausages that provide the McGuffin in seaside Punch and Judy shows). In either case, they have an odd ontology. Languishing in a property master's store, the prop practices a kind of inert mimesis, quite different from a work of art. The stage is the one place where it becomes something close to an authentic object, and even here it does so in support of a fiction. Propping-up, it seems, is what props do.

Sculpture has an uneasy relationship with prop-making. A medium much concerned with the direct physical encounter between the work and the viewer – the meeting of an art object and a human body on the same, shared ground – it struggles with the prop's peculiar combination of utility and artifice, and with how it dissolves into the fabric of an imagined world. For an artist to describe her own sculptural practice as a form of prop-making, as Sophie Jung does, is highly unusual, especially when we consider the finely calibrated assemblages that populate her exhibition *Come Fresh Hell or Fresh High Water*, each of which feels (to borrow a phrase from the poet Emily Dickinson) so sufficient to itself. Perhaps for her, the notion of the prop speaks not of limitations, but of an opportunity: the chance to test just how much textual weight a sculpture might bear.

Jung is, after all, a storyteller. In her sculptural installations – and the performances and texts that attend them – she weaves free-wheeling, deeply idiosyncratic, and sharply funny narratives, which draw on everything from pop culture to philosophy, the idlest of thoughts to the most heartfelt of convictions. Both objects and language are prone to slippage in this work, and form and content is always shifting shape. For *Come Fresh Hell or Fresh High Water*, Jung has transformed Blain|Southern's lower gallery into an environment that recalls at once a bunker, an ice cellar, a Brechtian stage set, and a dressing room. Scale, here, is subject to sudden glitches, and the most mundane of objects – coffee mugs, shower curtains, hat stands – hum with histories, ironies, and a simmering sense of fury.

From one angle, Jung's practice might be described as a skewed form of 'show and tell', in which she uses live monologues and audio and video soliloquies to introduce visitors to the objects she's assembled in the gallery space. But if her performances begin life as a loose verbal (and gestural) commentary on the ideas embedded in her sculptures, then they very quickly grow into something else, like an annotation that has overrun the margin of the page, and spilled into the outside world. The self that Jung presents in her monologues is not only chronically digressive, but is also given to making cavalier leaps of logic. By turns gawky and swaggering, sultry and manic, easily distracted and full of desperate focus, she seems driven by the need to link up her every stray thought, no matter how disparate, letting nothing go to waste, until her words begin to resemble a sprawling, eccentrically edited wiki.

One of the challenges (or even impossibilities?) faced by anybody writing a short text about Jung is how to approach the tangled and seemingly near-illimitable web of what she terms 'things/concepts/objects/stuff' that feeds into a given body of her

work, without overwhelming the reader with information. Perhaps the answer is to focus less on her individual reference points (which are in any case the subject of lively commentary in Jung's performance texts, reproduced elsewhere in this publication), than on the contours of the web itself. During the development of *Come Fresh Hell or Fresh High Water*, she emailed me a spidergram, outlining the connections she had intuited between her current preoccupations. For all its scribbled notes, crossings-out and urgent, radiating arrows, looking at it again now the show is installed, it has an odd sort of clarity. The words 'ice packs', 'permafrost' and 'Van Gogh's painting Shoes' (the most pondered over footwear in Western philosophy) have all found physical form in the sculpture *From The f'n Dark Of The f'n Worn Insides* (all works 2017). Similarly, Jung's fascination with such seemingly disparate 'things/concepts/objects/stuff' as the layout of Sigmund Freud's study, Henry Moore's militaristic portrait busts, Hélène Cixous's notion that women 'write in white ink', and her own grandmother's long-hidden artistic practice has been translated, with considerable sculptural aplomb, into the altar-cum-psychiatrist's couch of her *Reserved for Helpers*.

Thinking about the sheer volume of data disseminated in *Come Fresh Hell or Fresh High Water* (the show's stutteringly poetic title alone calls to mind everything from the melting of the polar ice caps to the weary witticisms of Dorothy Parker), it's tempting to wonder how we might ever process it all. Perhaps, though, this is not the point. Jung's art is not a riddle to be solved, or an equation to be balanced. Rather, it is something to be experienced, a stream of consciousness into which we might dip an exploratory toe, or much better, allow to sweep us clean away. For all that it teems with reference points, it does not demand that we approach it armed with any particular prior knowledge (indeed, if there is any artist who invites her audience to perform a mid-show Google, then surely it is Jung). What is important, here, is our willingness to travel along the wonky vectors the artist plots, whether they are between the corrosive effects of steel rebar on concrete and the gnarled fingernails of the 19th-Century German children's book character *Stuwwelpeter* (the sculpture and accompanying performance *Cautionary Tales*), or between the use of flammable cladding on British tower blocks and the recent sale, for \$16,000, of a sketch of the Empire State building by President Donald Trump (*Come to Grief*). From such chains of association, Jung braids her narratives. We might think of her as a hybrid of a search engine-enabled bricoleur and the *Basler Schnitzelbänggler* – a jester-figure who features in the carnival of Jung's sometime-home town of Basel, and who holds up a mirror to the world's hypocrisy, folly and vice.

Back, for a moment, to props. Emailing with Jung during the development of the show, she told me that what she calls the 'talent-scouting' she does for the found items that comprise her sculptures takes place long before she writes their attendant performances. That is, unlike a theatre prop, which is made necessary by a detail in a script, her props – their colours, shapes, and textures – precede the texts that they prop-up. They are, in her words, 'the main actors' in her dramas, who 'decide, based on their collaged bodies and their back stories, on how the narrative unfolds'. Form 'invites meaning in as a first tenant [...] a very fragile and insecure yet extremely playful and flexible lodger'. Just as Jung destabilises her sculptural practice by reimagining it as a species of cart-before-the-horse prop-making, so she appears to frequently derail her own performances, falling prey to hesitations, salty asides, bursts of song, Tommy Cooper-esque object gags, and groan-inducing puns. Storytelling, here, is not about authority, or beginnings, middles and endings, but ultimately about the contingency of knowledge, and of meaning. It is also, I think, about taking pleasure in the dexterity – and the multiplicity – of a single human voice