

No Matter How Strong



Charlotte Cullen

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Introduction - David Gilbert

Nisa Khan and Charlotte Cullen have been the first artists in residence to use Artcore's new City Centre space, which has given them scope to make work on a large scale, and for Artcore to reach new audiences in Derby.

In many ways this has been the archetype of the perfect residency; individually, both have made ambitious new work and extended their respective practices, and collaboratively they have made experimental work together.

There are fascinating formal and thematic links between their work – both use elemental and natural materials such as salt, mud, steel, and water, which flows and drips literally and figuratively through the exhibition. Both artists use what appears to be a deceptively simple palette of materials to allude to the complexities and contradictions of identity, emotion and their essential humanity. In our conversations we talked about simplicity, about paring back the work to only what is essential, about the artist doing what is essential to the work, and to its meaning, and nothing more, and I think that is what they have achieved – a synthesis of the simple and the complex.

Conversation with Charlotte Cullen

How did you become an artist?

While studying textiles I began to develop an art practice. I responded to briefs working in communities and I developed work to be exhibited. During this time I set up a small artist led project, publishing a zine and organising and curating exhibitions and events. After studying textiles I was offered a studentship to undertake a practice led PhD in fine art. As a first-generation student from a working class background this opportunity enabled me to develop a practice as an artist. It gave me the tools to think critically, understand art histories and be grateful for the artists who have forged a path for me to be able to make the work that I do now. It has empowered me to have a voice and to be confident in my abilities. During this time I exhibited more widely in group exhibitions, learning from peers and developing my practice. I developed another curatorial project, had my first solo exhibitions and joined an artist led studio group which I am still part of.

Where do your ideas come from?

There is often an immediacy in how I work, responding to personal experiences relating to long term illness and intergenerational trauma. I take time to expand on how this is approached by going out in nature, writing, reading and foraging for materials. I am interested in allegorical connections between the material of the land, thinking about ancestors and the passage of time. Mythology, religion, history, geology and family stories might also affect colourways, approaches or the choice of certain materials. Ultimately, I am a material maker and work develops and takes form in response to the material in the studio or on site.

How do you transform ideas into art?

I think much of it is having a sensitivity to materials, taking the time to look at and learn from them. I bring aspects of my research together and may have an idea of an outcome but the material takes over and the process becomes a conversation.

How are you responding to the Residency theme?

Returning to Derby to undertake the Artcore No Matter How Strong Residency I was interested in how I could re-root myself in the landscape of Derby. Having moved from Derbyshire ten years prior the city centre felt full of ghosts; half-forgotten memories and uncanny recollections of streets and other open spaces. As an entry way I began developing a fieldwork method of research. Following routes and pathways through the city I found respite by the river edge and began to think about the intergenerational relationship of early settlers also coming to

the river, interacting with the same site and mud, the same material heritage. This has informed how I've approached material and making and led me to develop more work on site in the landscape. Through this I've learnt about tools, process and developed a relationship to the land and excavation to learn about making, healing and the intergenerational relationship of craft and material. The river has played an important role in this as a central force through Derby and the presence of streams throughout and under the city.

What do you hope to get out of the residency?

The residency has helped me engage more purposefully with site and consider additional ways to engage with my practice and concerns. I have developed a map outlining a route of ephemeral works created along the river during the residency which is a new way of working for me and has pushed my writing practice to become more intrinsically linked to my making. I have been able to develop work technically, including a pump system into my sculptures and have worked with casting for the first time. I have been thinking about the relationship of sculpture to geology and archaeology which has helped me reconsider my relationship to materials and how I might present, frame and further my practice.

Collaborative work - text by Nisa Khan

Quite early into their residency Cullen and Khan had noticed the overlaps in their works, the similarities, the movement, the processes and ultimately their shared enthusiasm for material exploration.

A common interest was in ceramics, to experiment and to learn. Charlotte's previous works have explored ceramics, working with mud, clay and other materials which derive from nature and the environment both natural and synthetic. Nisa, however, had limited experience of working with ceramics. Her initial interests were in merely firing the salt, which she learned - being a mineral as it is - would heat up like coal and eventually burn. This put a damper on things. She researched how salt and ceramics work - she learned that using a salt glaze would create an orange-peel effect, but what would the Himalayan salt do? Would its hues be different to that of British sea salt? Would it fire at a higher/lower temperature given that it is a denser material?

Khan's excitement quickly dissipated given the news that when salt is fired in a kiln its volatile nature means that the salt would attach itself to the surface of the kiln, rendering it unusable for conventional firing - it would become a salt kiln.

An insightful conversation with Derby University's Fine Art Technical Advisor, Ben Atkins opened the possibility of working with clay and salt by creating a Saggar Box which in effect acts as a kiln within a kiln. It is a chunky structure made using stoneware clay, the walls of which are half an inch thick. The idea was to place clay into the Saggar whilst layering it with combustibles and organic materials such as salt, mud, banana peels, foliage and copper wire. Each material would react in a different manner, leaving its mark on the ceramics.

Cullen and Khan invested three days to make the saggars and their trial pieces, not knowing if the saggars would survive, unsure if the materials would leave their mark, for them it was exciting to be involved in the making process, the unknown intrigued them.

The saggars acts as the earth from which these materials are either grown or extracted. In placing organic materials such a salt, mud, clay, foliage, vegetation and copper together they created an environment which somewhat resembles what lies beneath the ground – given to the elements, these materials were placed in close proximity, and they stained, bled and charred, interactions occurring beyond human control.

The saggars exploded. Remnants of what had occurred appeared in mounds, incinerated. They carefully excavated, unsure of what they would find - if they would find. Their hunger and curiosity urged them to dig deep within the shattered vessels.

Undeterred by the sulphurous dust and heat of the materials they rummaged and found and dusted and beamed. For what they had amidst the dust and the salt was evidence of what occurs when organic materials meet and merge, albeit in a synthetic environment. Beyond their control. These saggars for them are not a point of departure, these are the foundations of new ways to explore and to consider their materials, a chance to understand their organic qualities and appreciate that nature has its own voice, its own identity.



1. Throwing



2. Rolling



3. Cutting



4. Building



5. Wrapping



6. Packing



7. Packing



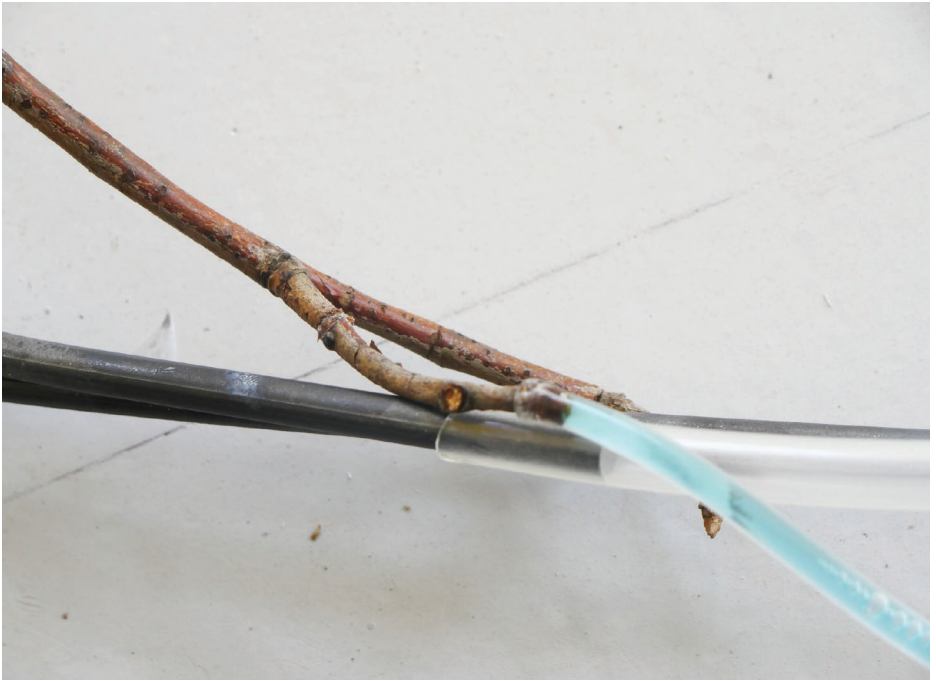
8. After Firing



9. Excavating



10. Excavating









Artist Biography

Artist and researcher Charlotte Cullen creates environments grounded in the land, working through sculpture, installation and text. Scavenged and ephemeral materials entwine with formal material enquiries in metal and clay. While traversing the embodied material nature of social class, desire and disadvantage Cullen is particularly concerned with trauma and the body, sickness and familiar bonds, and how this can be tacitly understood through the land, ecosystems, symbiotic relationships and climate crisis. Working through the idea of the retreating warrior this process seeks to find safety and a place to heal from the ground, to take respite so to fight again. The work is weed like, finding methods and materials from the ground to build and restore. Twigs become additional limbs, protruding from a metal vertebrate to make new appendages, clay is dug from the ground to heal wounds, while broken materials from man-made waste create hybrid new attack strategies in the warrior's arsenal. Informed by locality, geology and geopolitics, Cullen's work interacts with and develops on site, while text works entwine local and natural histories, socio- and geopolitics and enact emotional intergenerational and familiar bonds.

Cullen was awarded a Vice Chancellors Studentship with support from Yorkshire Sculpture Park to undertake a Practice-led PhD with the Centre for Sculptural Thinking at the University of Huddersfield titled *The Politics of Wanting Things. Manifestations of Cruel Optimism in Artist Led Curatorial Practice: A Case Study of the U N N A W A Y Exhibition Programme*, completed in 2018. Cullen recently completed an Arts Council England public art commission for Yorkshire Year of the Textiles at the Royal Pump Room, Harrogate and in 2016 was selected for UK Young Artists. A member of artist-led studio and project space serf, Leeds, Cullen is responsible for serf off-site projects and serf school, serf's peer to peer learning programme. Previously they were founder and curator of U N N A W A Y, Huddersfield. Their research considers a material repositioning of artist-led practice and ecologies. Upcoming projects include: Artshake International Gathering '19, Yiyuan Tang Museum, Shanghai, China, selected by UK Young Artists; No Matter How Strong, duo exhibition with Nisa Khan, Artcore, Derby; Poorly Sorted Materials, duo exhibition with Puy Soden, Freehold, Leeds; '... Even if it is Someone Else's*' serf group show, part of Index Festival, Leeds; Contributing writer, Index festival publication, edited by Nocturne; Middlesbrough Art Weekender 2019; Sculpture as Fieldwork, Temporary Contemporary, Huddersfield. Recent and current projects include: No Matter How Strong, Artist in Residence with Artcore, Derby (2019); DIY and the Artist led Space presentation, Yan Tan Tether, Huddersfield (2019); Skegness Weekender: Terrain Vague residency with UK Young Artists and So Festival, Skegness (2019); Commission by Mathew Parkin and Poor Image Projects (PiP) (2018); contributing writer to 'A Queer Anthology of Sickness', Pilot Press, London (2019) and 'serf'n'turf' group exhibition at Croydon Arts Store, London (2019).



About Artcore

Artcore is a contemporary arts space that celebrates the cultural richness and diversity of Derby, the East Midlands and beyond. The venue presents an ever-changing programme of art exhibitions, creative activities for adults and young people, film screenings, artist residencies, talks, and festivals.

With our statement “together we stand”, we want to engage and connect with a diverse range of communities in Derby. Our key objectives are to use art as a tool to strengthen community cohesion, to engage with a wide range of audiences, to educate, raise awareness and provide a space to build self-confidence and mutual trust and respect.

Artcore offers a contemporary gallery, workshop and artist studio promoting distinctive art and culture. Through a vibrant programme of events, exhibitions, residencies, art talks, screenings we provide a platform to showcase significant art locally, nationally and internationally by supporting early, mid-career artists and established artists.

At Artcore, education is fundamental to the work we do. We develop and strengthen this through an informal education approach. Our main objective is to engage young people in learning experiences to enhance their curiosity and interest on their art skills, developing their uniqueness and progression as individual, also through volunteering and work experience.

We believe art acts as a learning tool, breaking down barriers and contributing to the production of knowledge and dialogue as a vehicle for analysis and growth. Moreover we engage with our audience through creative, imaginative and meaningful activities, offering the individuals the opportunity to experiment with creativity, enhance learning and broaden career prospects.



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