

Unstable Stuff

an essay by Melbourne-based artist and critic Liang Xia Luscombe

In 1944, Dubuffet gave his friend Jean Paulham one of his paintings. Several days later the painting began to melt, and continued to melt, due to the untested materials he was then employing (asphalt for example). Two years later, and despite his precautions, yet another gift to Paulham began to sweat. Dubuffet apologising wrote:

"I am very alarmed by this hematidrosis phenomena concerning the Hommes des Murailles. I had carefully chosen a painting about which nothing of the like could be expected, and this painting was the only one that seemed to me...completely reliable. Nothing more alarming than oozings, which stain anything placed under the picture in the dirtiest manner. I am astounded. And with great unease I imagine what the other pictures are doing."

Paulham and Dubuffet's mischievous and somewhat surreal correspondence captures Jessica Herrington's own inquiry into the unstable nature of materials. More than this Herrington aims and takes pleasure from her paintings oozes and drips, just as Dubuffet describes. Herrington's objects explore the process of liquefying and dissolving solid form - this destabilisation is at the centre of a seductive and yet precarious practice. Her recent sculpture series emerge as rock formations, bulbous and abject. The physicality of working with the material is often apparent in her finished works. Made from plaster, Herrington literally pours and pushes the materials to breaking point, until the sculpture's structure and weight forces it to fall in on itself. This point of excess that is reached in Herrington's working process embraces a tension between growth and descent, as if Herrington herself has only just managed to retain control.

Strong links can be seen between Herrington's black paintings and her more recent sculptural works. The painting's surface is built up with pours and pools of black paint. As the paint drips and oozes off the black paintings, it is almost as if these drips fall and form her heaped and textured sculptural works. Herrington clearly shows materials as matter in their own right and with their own unique set of properties - whether this is plaster, paint or glitter. She does not attempt to manipulate the material to present illusion. This allows the material to appear as a tactile and dynamic matter.

Undertaking a residency at the Research School of Chemistry, ANU, Herrington's studio has become the laboratory. This sudden change of environment has given rise to a shift in Herrington's approach to process and materials. During her residency Herrington experimented with the growth of Chrome Alum and Copper Sulphate crystals. The brilliantly coloured blue and purple crystals appear as sublime natural phenomena, however, they are manufactured in a laboratory environment. What emerges from the crystal pieces is a play between the synthetic and natural world; Herrington's practice gently reflects current trends of amalgamation that extend beyond the art world. Seen in computer technologies and Biotechnologies, and the hybridization of plants and crops.

Herrington's foray into crystals can be seen as a response to the Roger Hiorn's installation *Seizure*, 2008 in which Hiorn encrusted an entire three-roomed apartment wall-to-ceiling with sparkling azure crystals. The use of crystals in both artists' practice connects the ephemeral with the elusive. There is an impalpable quality within Herrington's crystal pieces that is presented through the very light weighted clusters that form over the existing structures that are selected; for example bricks and cardboard boxes. This interest in the crystal extends as a material that not only transforms existing objects, but also itself. This is true of copper sulphate, which changes from liquid to vivid blue crystals. This element allows the sculpture to finish itself without the artist's hand or their control; in this way Herrington's use of chance as a mechanism for art making becomes central to her current practice.

Between crystal growing and paintings that decompose and drip to the floor, Jessica Herrington's practice is one itching to bend the parameters of what we see as art. Her work is an experiment in our expectations; she attempts to push these structures to a point where they literally can't stand up unless we are willing to concede and be swayed by art's inherently precarious position.

Liang Xia Luscombe

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