

MIRROR

A Discussion Between Artist Jo Lathwood and Curator Hannah Rose

Exhibition: The Belief in Things Disappearing. 6th Oct - 15th Dec 2023. MIRROR.

Our conversations started in September 2021, which means we have been discussing your work together for two years now.

We have had so many rich and interesting chats which speak to the concerns of your practice and the interests shaping this new body of work and solo exhibition. I really wanted to share some of this with our audiences to give a greater insight into this process and your practice.

Could you start by talking about your practice as a sculptor and at what point the concerns you have about the environmental impact of the work, started to shape how you make artwork?

I think I can easily divide my sculptural practice into two boxes. One is a desire to make and build things. These tend to be big structures that the audience walks through, on, or around, they also tend to have some link with architecture or site. The other thread is a fascination with materials. How things come to be or where things come from is a constant inspiration.

The key focus within both of these ways of working is sustainability, I often think when I make work- what is going to happen to all of this stuff? This is very much prominent in this exhibition, *The Belief in Things Disappearing*, because we've had such a long time building up to it, it's given me the chance to have that as the starting point as opposed to being an afterthought once the exhibition is running.

In 2020, I wrote an (open) [sustainable manifesto](#) of how I want to approach making things, just to keep me aware and make sure I'm not making obvious mistakes, like ending up with loads of polystyrene at the end of the show and not knowing what to do with it.

Can you describe the material investigations you have been undertaking into biomaterials (including your work with STEAMhouse in Birmingham) and other sustainable and ethical materials you've been considering in the lead up to this show?

My involvement with STEAMhouse began during COVID-19 when they (like many organisations) had to adapt quickly to online work. STEAMhouse, which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Maths, made a unique choice by adding the "A" for Art, allowing artists to play an integral role.

I joined a group called Materials Club, a niche community, primarily composed of artists but also featuring designers and scientists. Each of us received a little package of biomaterials in the post, we would convene on Zoom to discuss our experiments and our shared fascination with these materials.

Biomaterials represent a relatively recent development in the field of material science, focused on creating substances that can potentially replace plastics. Interestingly, they draw heavily from traditional and forgotten indigenous technologies. These approaches have been overshadowed by more efficient methods in the past, but perhaps efficiency is not the paramount concern anymore, especially if you try to view the world through an anti-capitalist gaze.

Many biomaterial recipes are open source, readily available on numerous websites, enabling anyone to experiment with them. These materials often aim to replace specific substances; for instance, you can craft a plant-based, slightly translucent, stretchy plastic to mimic cellophane, but materials like this are still in their early stages of development.

I found joy in being an artist (as opposed to a product designer) as I didn't need the materials to be super functional, so I could be more playful within these materials' spectrums.

It would be interesting to hear you talk about the challenges you've faced working with these materials and what you've been most excited about.

One of my primary goals was to scale up the things I was making with biomaterials, but as soon as I started doing that, there were complications. The shrinkage rate, which is a big thing with new materials, was so fast, they started cracking and not holding their structure. I have learnt different ways I can get around this now, but that was the most challenging problem for me. For the exhibition, I cast a series of alchemical symbols, and then over a course of three days as they dried, they sort of pulled themselves apart, but then that became more poetically interesting than the sculptures themselves and developed into a new video work which is included in this exhibition.

When you start experimenting with biomaterials you realise there are two distinct approaches. On one hand, there's the cutting-edge technology aspect, where you blend various chemical components to create novel substrates. Simultaneously, there's a connection to traditional methodology and a huge crossover with kitchen science.

I mostly worked with a mixture of waste coffee grounds, agar (a seaweed derivative), vegetable glycerin, and water, which, when heated, undergoes a chemical reaction and transforms into a slightly spongy solid with a rubberized texture. My intention was to craft sculptures from these materials and then bury them in the ground, allowing them to decompose (because I am interested in creating art without the desire to possess it or sell it through traditional commercial galleries).

We have talked a lot about the dichotomy between you being an artist, specifically a sculptor who makes things that live in the world (including public art works, artworks that people own and exhibitions) and your commitment to making work which is responsive to the urgency of the climate crisis. Can you talk about how you are managing to resolve this within your practice?

I think this comes from a rejection of seeing sculptures as monuments. I understand there's a place in history for it, but I don't think it's always appropriate to make really permanent objects. If you look at the Seven Principles of the 'Leave No Trace' movement, many of the points really resonate with an environmentally considerate way to make artwork: Plan ahead and prepare; Dispose of waste properly; Leave what you find; Respect wildlife and Be considerate of others - are all principles that guide my work.

As a sculptor, I believe there are alternative avenues for fostering creative expression without the need for extensive use of materials like silicone rubber, resins and metals to create large, permanent works. I know how to do all those things and they're fun, but I'm trying to find a way that I minimise my use of those materials.

This way of working always demands more of my time and energy but it is my choice to expend my energy. It is my resource.

The artworld is in part built on the business of making and selling artwork and on exhibiting and transporting artworks. You are resisting this system in different ways, making work that can be dismantled and repurposed; work that can biodegrade; and in the case of this exhibition - making work that will in different ways 'disappear'. Can you talk about the challenge of how you operate as an artist within artworld structures and how you think about value and longevity within your practice?

In my BA Fine Art Degree, nobody was really talking about the commercial side of stuff, because I think it always felt quite saturated. The expectation that you'd become an artist that would sell work to make money and live off, was like the equivalent of being in the music industry and presuming you were going to be a pop star. You can totally make music and you can totally make art, but I didn't expect to get paid for it, so that was never really a driver or expectation.

Ironically, that shifted for me during the lockdown because I started selling drawings through the Artist's Support Pledge. I had never really sold work before, but selling drawings seemed simpler in some capacity and I liked the approach of the initiative, which was trying to level the playing field of who can afford to buy artwork (all items had to be sold at £250 or less) and who was eligible to sell or be considered as 'an artist'. It also had generosity embedded, by the directive that once you make £1000 you would buy another artist's work.

I guess I'm sort of sitting on the fence slightly, I'm not against work being sold, but I've just never been in that world. I don't know how I would sell a giant structure that's made out of recycled timber, especially one that has been specifically designed for a site, as the concept behind the work would also shift. I feel that the commercial side of the art world is pretty precarious.

It would be interesting to hear you talk about how you sustain your practice as an artist?

I have other non-art jobs. I think the idea of being an artist and not doing anything else but art is hard to reach. The reality, I think, for most people, is you have busy periods of shows, projects and commissions and then you have gaps. When I have gaps, I do gallery technician work, because I'm a very practical person and I've got those related skills, or I do

fabrication work for other artists. I like it, I get to work with other people and see and learn new things. It provides a space to think differently.

As I've gotten older the percentage of time I spend as an artist and the time I spend doing other work has shifted, because I have managed to prioritise making artwork. That's how I've got to where I am now, through keeping focus and trying to get a better balance. It's a tricky balance, but eventually you write your own destiny.

**So when you started prioritising your practice, what sort of work were you making?
Primarily public realm commissions? Have these been temporary works or permanent?**

I've done some permanent public artworks, but I'm really new to it and I'm learning. I am aware that this sounds like I am contradicting myself! I'm not against permanence, but I am against waste.

A couple of years ago I made a bespoke pavilion, called *Home from Home* as part of a commission, and when we took it down, I recycled the timber by making it into chairs. I thought if I could make this material into something that people wanted and would use, then it would last longer and have another lifespan. There's an embedded story attached to the chairs. I think it is interesting to consider how the work travels past its initial intended form or audience. Some of that timber is even in this exhibition.

I think a lot about the lifespan of the things I make, and how they can continue to have value and be put into use. From these interests, I wanted to understand more about the end cycle of materials and this led me to look into the Energy from Waste Plant in Plymouth. I wanted to be more aware of what actually happens to all our stuff once we are finished with it. You don't really get to find this out in detail until you visit these sites.

The artworld is perhaps starting to think more about its environmental impact but it feels that there is a lot of work and changes to be made in terms of how artworks are produced, transported, stored and presented. At MIRROR we've been slowing down our programme and presenting exhibitions for longer, something I've noticed other galleries doing as well. We have been thinking far more carefully about the production of our exhibitions and making sure that we reuse materials whenever possible. What are your thoughts on how you can see changes being made in the sector?

I think a lot of it could be really systems based. If we could value materials more and move away from the concept of the pristine, then more materials would get reused. We need to focus on the three R's - Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. The issue of transporting artworks is complex, but from a wider gaze, using energy doesn't necessarily mean not sustainable, it just depends what type of energy is used. You have to consider transportation options and systems - for example, what fossil fuels are being used and whether you can replace this with green energy?

A very simple example would be to think of scrap stores, think how great Plymouth Scrap Store is, we should just have more. Universities, galleries, building companies etc should all have a place where materials can be sorted and dispersed. It's worth remembering that the three R's are listed in priority, recycling is the last action.

Could you talk about your experience of visiting the Energy from Waste Plant in Plymouth (MVV) and what you found out?

I thought a trip to an 'Energy From Waste Plant' would be really harrowing and full on. I went with Elaine (Assistant Curator at MIRROR) and I think she didn't have any preconceptions so probably found it more intense than I did, I was prepared for it to be difficult. The MVV plant is actually very clean and as far as a factory of industrial processes goes, you can kind of get a handle on it. You're not really affronted with the amount of waste being processed until you get to the tipping halls. The tipping halls are where the trucks come in and offload the very familiar domestic bin bags of rubbish. This rubbish includes anything from a mattress, to umbrellas to an England football flag. The only thing the plant can't process is gas canisters and rope, but apart from that literally everything else gets processed, and when I say processed, I mean burnt. Literally set on fire.

I feel we often have distinct reactions to burning things; either something pleasant, social and warming (Campfires and wood burners) or something that smells bad and feels wrong. But burning anything releases gases that are effectively responsible for increasing global emissions. The chemical reactions are complex and obviously the plastic ones are much worse. At MVV it seems kind of insane that there's no filtering process. It's literally just giant grabbers, scooping up stuff and putting it in this huge inferno.

My understanding of how the plant works is basically stuff gets burned and transformed into energy. The emissions get filtered, so any emissions leaving the plant are a much lower risk to the environment. But what then happens to all those things that are filtering the emissions? Surely they're accumulating loads of toxins, and then what do we do with that? I believe (disclaimer MVV did not tell me this) that some of these saturated materials get locked into disused mines or sent away to other countries to deal with.

The fact that it's now seen as a green energy is very complicated. From my point of view, governmental systems push the agenda that it is okay to take on this form of waste disposal, and I would argue that it is definitely better than landfill, but it's not the final solution.

You have been researching the history of magic shows and performers; those who came to Plymouth in the early 1900'S (such as Houdini); familiar performers from TV that you and I grew up with and more hidden figures such as Adelaide Herrmann. Can you talk about how this research has informed your development for the show?

I've always really loved illusions, not necessarily magic tricks, but the kinds of things where your perception is tested or changed. It provides a space, where you start questioning what's real and what's not real. I really like providing these 'other' spaces or these 'other' aesthetics that create something that you're not expecting and I think magic really fits into this realm.

As a queer artist, I wanted to approach magic from a unique angle, steering away from the conventional image of white men in top hats performing on television. My research led me to Adelaide Herman, an extraordinary but forgotten magician. In keeping with some of the themes behind the exhibition, Adelaide wrote a memoir but it never got published in her lifetime and was lost. Amazingly 8 years ago, another magician called Marget Steele found

the memoir after she too became fascinated by this trailblazing magician and managed to publish it.

During my exploration into magic for the exhibition, I also worked with an amazing magician called Peter Clifford. When we did the filming for *The Belief in Things Disappearing*, we didn't have to do any editing, Peter really has mastered the craftsmanship of sleight of hand tricks. He has worked with big name magicians but for his own magic practice, he keeps it really simple; a few props and a small audience - the bravado isn't necessary. I really respect him for keeping it pure.

Adelaide on the other hand was a different fish, her credit in history really should be that she brought theatre and magic together. She started making ridiculous costumes and thinking about lighting and staging - a game changer for the scene at that time.

It's funny because with magic tricks, I think we don't believe in them anymore. You know, no one's going to freak out that the wedding ring has actually totally disappeared. They know that the magician is going to give it back to them at some point. I remember talking to Peter on a studio visit, when I started exploring the link between magic and waste. He used this analogy to describe how magic works, which I really liked:

If you imagine a graph, with a straight line running along the bottom, that line is your expectation. A magician's job is to start telling stories and shifting your judgement but in a way that you don't realise that you are navigating off course. With the magician you are travelling along a curved line that arches way above the straight line running horizontally. The trick climaxes at the point when the distance between where you think you are and where the magician has been guiding you is revealed. That shift then seems impossible and uncanny.

You set a self made challenge to create a show that disappears and in different ways it will. By returning materials back to Plymouth Scrap Store, reusing the timber again and producing work that will naturally degrade. Could you talk about what this approach means for you as an artist going forward?

Although I have made artworks and strategies for this exhibition which means that most aspects will disappear or be repurposed in different ways, I've also made two video works, which have a very different lifespan which is complicated and a knotty conundrum in terms of the resources used to make them which I am still working through. The films have been a massive learning curve. For this show I don't think I could have made other works that weren't films because of all the huge conversations I wanted to encompass.

This concept of a disappearing show is still relatively new to me and I'm still trying to grasp the idea and its implications. Some of the works won't exist, their literal destiny is to be catapulted into the sea but some might come out again in different iterations.

Going forward, I have another show opening early next year at The Lowry in Salford. This has enabled me to plan how the timber used for the central structure in the exhibition at MIRROR will get transformed into another structure. Part of the design for that exhibition is that the wood will then be reformatted again to make boxes and dispersed as functional objects to the public.

This opportunity has given me the scope to really think about the end first, which is what I'm doing all the time now. Working backwards.

LINKS

[Jo Lathwood's Website](#)

[The Belief in Things Disappearing](#), MIRROR, Arts University Plymouth 6th Oct - 15th Dec 2023

[Manifesto For Producing Sustainable Artwork](#), Jo Lathwood. 2022.