

Figures in a Political Landscape

Interview with Jemima Brown

by Matthew de Pulford

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Matthew de Pulford: You organised this project before the general election was announced.

Jemima Brown: Yes, quite a long time before, in part arising from the experience of the 2015 election. It's not a good thing that there's going to be an election.

But, in relation to this project, is it a good thing? This project is on such different terms. It's slower in the way that it's thinking about politics. Plus, I am personally conflicted because I want to be out tramping the pavements, (campaigning in the election), which is generally what I'd be more inclined to do at times like these.

But maybe that's okay.

MdP: The tension surrounding the election animates the work in a particular way.

JB: Yes, I think that on balance, for this project and what I'm doing with my work, it's probably quite a good thing. It's not going to stop me campaigning, and in a way it heightens the relationship between my artwork and activism.

MdP: Do you think the practice is as politically positioned as you are as an activist?

JB: No, I think it's more ambiguous and nuanced. There are more uncertainties.

In our earlier discussions you asked me about my levels of empathy for the *Tory Wives* [2017] and I think there might be a grain of empathy that I'm digging very hard to find. Maybe I'm thinking about whether it is the right thing to do to find it, to break out of the 'echo chamber'

MdP: Are you trying to emphasise commonality? In that, on a basic level, for all your differences from them, these are women, as you are?

JB: Yes, both recent and past work has talked to the experience of women, and the men, as previously, are quite peripheral in this project.

There is an oil painting on canvas, set up on an easel in a 'studio' area, that I am making while I'm in the project space at Crate, which is from a photograph of the 1985 Conservative Party conference. I think I'm going to end-up taking it away before the project ends, and instead use another watercolour pencil interpretation of the same image, which I'll pin quite high to the wall as a kind of backdrop to the largest table piece, *Top Table* [2017].

MdP: Does the oil painting and easel arrangement connect to the subject matter of the painting, as a kind of conservative gesture?

JB: Yes, maybe. In fact, I quite like that, but I don't think it's going to work throughout the project. I don't want [the painting and easel arrangement] fixed here, but rather for it to be something that changes as things progress. I want the disruption between the spaces of art and politics to occur through the adjusted height and placement of the table assemblages and in the way that they refer to banqueting tables - they aren't at a height you could eat at.

MdP: The tables feel like plinths for showpieces, such as one might find in a wedding showroom or another slightly chintzy commercial setting.

JB: Yes, one is a standard 5' dining table, and I have cut cloths especially to fit the other, smaller tables so that they all hang with a neatly folded pleat.

MdP: The folding form of pleats or ruffles repeats through a few of the objects you have made.

JB: I've been playing with that while I've been here at Crate. It was something I had hoped might happen when I brought the work from the studio to here.

I think these themes become evident through the decision making process. Some things are just now finding their place. I'm working with found objects, and there is a kind of accumulation where themes start to suggest

themselves. For example, the sculpture with blue glass domes - 'she' doesn't really need a head. She has enough of a dress to not need one... so, although on the surface of things the work is decorative and quite frilly, some of what I'm doing is quite reductive, a bit like in an older work from 2004, 'The Brown Girl', of a girl in a chair, where the fact that she only has one leg almost goes un-noticed.

MdP: The way the individual assemblages are balanced on each of these tables is quite figurative.

JB: This is something I want to experiment with, to establish the dynamic between them, and how they might be choreographed.

MdP: There's something about ornamentation in the way in components are brought together, isn't there? Or accessorising?

JB: Yes, definitely accessorising. I think it's about sliding scales of representation. Something as extreme as this piece [a clay figure with a door handle fixed to the top] can sit uncomfortably - uncomfortably in the way I'm looking for - with those pieces that you might think of as more figurative, like the head with the pan-scourer shawl.

MdP: It might be the use of colour, but it looks like these arrangements are presented in pairs, with what could be a person, and an object which looks designed to 'go with' a kind of person. When we spoke before the project, you made it quite clear that you were thinking of all of these objects as 'figures'. But it does feel that there is a kind of visual hierarchy here.

JB: That's what I mean by a 'sliding scale'. When I get to play around a little bit more in terms of the placement of them I think each one will have its place as a figure within the grander choreography of the space. As I move the figures around and one sits next to the other, it reveals more about how much of the body both pieces can represent and so shifts their position on that sliding scale.

MdP: I think the methods of folding, latticework and feathering share a sensibility, but I'm not sure how to describe it. Is it liveliness? Is it fussiness? Is it baroque?

JB: Sort of fussy, but also slightly dishevelled! I find this figure of a young woman quite reminiscent of Princess Diana circa 1987. I think because of the hair, the earrings - and the way the dress and shoulders are implied. There is a balance between fussiness and dishevelment.

MdP: You speak about the assemblages as though you believe they have agency.

JB: I do. The works have a performative aspect which is really important to them and has run through my work for a really long time.

Slightly more than twenty years ago, I made a life-sized copy of myself, Dolly, and all of my work was made with her.

Previously I had been using my own body in my work in quite a performative way, and I wanted to have a stand-in for myself. So I made that stand-in using a blow-up sex doll. It wasn't irrelevant that that was what she was, but she took on a life of her own as she incorporated parts made from casts of my head and hands and feet, though she was still quite rudimentary.

A lot of the early work I made with her was photographic or video-based. In one of the first video pieces I made with her [*Pumping up Dolly Brown*, 1997], I was pumping her up, or rather, trying to pump her up, but she had a leak, so it was always failing - a kind of 'loop' of dissatisfaction. We looked the same, and we were dressed in the same way.

I became more interested in the two of us in comparison, or together. We would go on holiday together. We would be together at home doing mundane domestic things. These activities would be documented in photographs or videos. The work gradually grew into a 'collaboration', even reaching a point where she wasn't in the images, but had status as joint author of the work for some time.

At a certain point I didn't want either of us in the images anymore and the work started to branch-out into making dolls of other people. But she was still 'there'. I continued to drag her around with me for a good few years, and as I began making other work, she was still in my studio, propped up in the corner, doing nothing. But also, in a way, not doing nothing. She was, in some way, directing things.

McP: I find this really interesting. What is the nature of Dolly's agency and what effect can it have on your actions? Is it to do with respect? Is it imaginary, or a real thing?

JB: Well, the less you saw of her, the more real she became. When it reached the point that she only existed in name for a few years, she became almost more real than when I had been dragging her around as a life-sized mannequin.

I still feel that in the work in this show there is a thread that goes back to what was going on with her.

McP: How did Dolly change your behaviour? Did having an externalised version of yourself provide you a different kind of license?

JB: Maybe. She was very good at sitting still, of course. And I made some video which was about trying to copy her. A lot of the work with her was quite funny - about her liabilities becoming her assets.

McP: Was there a point where she ceased being a representation of you?

JB: Definitely. She was Dolly, and I was Jemima. Of course, she had to be activated by me. And then, eventually, there were situations where others were invited to activate her.

After that, I carried on making dolls as props to be photographed, - beginning with the Little Girl series [2001] - I started showing them as sculptures. They were all versions of Dolly, and later, even when I started making casts of other people, using other people as actors in the work, they too functioned as Dolly had done.

I later made a video series called *Screentests* [2007-], where my eyes were superimposed over a range of faces I cast. In these videos I was 'testing-out' identities. This is something that's still going on with this work [at Crate] and the way I'm thinking about performance here.

McP: It's interesting to think about performance in relation to the scenario you have created here at Crate. It's not an exhibition per-se; it's a situation where you are making in the space, as well as showing, and doing the two things simultaneously.

You seem to be suggesting that there is something intrinsically performative and identity-trialling in the process of making artworks. What kind of things are happening in that performance? Are identities being tried-out, or is this something to do with representation?

JB: Yes, I think those things are tied together. Trying something out, trying out an identity - this is about figuring-out what to represent. And there's certainly an amount of copying in that.

McP: In order to represent, one has to externalise. So 'represent' feels like an apt word to describe a lot of things that happen in the studio in general, and particularly with what you were doing with Dolly. I think that carries over to the motif of the head with the grimace you use repeatedly in your work, and the way it changes incrementally each time you use it.

JB: There is a set of different [model] heads I use. I started using myself, then members of my family and that expanded as I looked for participants.

The work employs a cast of characters, whether in the *Screentests* videos, or in the scaled-down figures, or in the full-sized figures I was making a few years ago. They have become the actors in the work and can reach further out than Dolly was able to, but I'm still very aware of negotiating my own visibility in the work

McP: You talked about the video with you pumping-up Dolly as engaging with

something unsatisfactory.

JB: I suppose a question I'm asking a lot is whether something becomes unsatisfactory when it enters the 'real world'. If I think about older work and the threads that come through from that, it's a key topic. Particularly, finding satisfaction in that insufficiency. Finding things that are perhaps pleasing or decorative, where a sense of adornment can show itself through the process of making, taking apart and putting back together. Accumulation.

MdP: When you say 'through the process', are you talking about having objects at different stages of 'finish'? This makes the mode of construction, which is sometimes ad-hoc, quite visible. So the parallel between the highly finished hair on two of the pieces (such as the Diana circa '87 mentioned earlier) invites comparison between these assemblages which are otherwise very different in terms of how mimetically figurative they are. I maybe see them as steps on the sliding scale you mentioned.

JB: I think quite a lot about how one model might be made to seem provisional next to another.

MdP: And that's one of the reasons why it's important that they are brought together?

JB: Yeah, I think that in bringing these new works to Crate, I'm figuring out how they fit together in groups. For example, I showed an earlier set of works using figurines [*Tabletop* Peacecamp, 2013 - ongoing] on a table as a big group, but there are some of them which I am happy to show as individual pieces.

I can't imagine showing any of these current figurines on their own; the grouping of them is really important. I think I will reach a point over the next few weeks with this work where I see each collection of assemblages on a table as completed pieces.

Even the pieces that take themselves off the table (such as the gold one with the pampas grass hair probably will) will sit in relation to one or other of these different pieces. I think the grouping of them is the work because it's vital to the sense of staged provisionality.

There are also the more figurative images, acting as backdrops, which is perhaps a further extension of this. But I feel like the two dimensional works could be shown on their own or in small groups, but I wouldn't show the sculptures in that way.

MdP: There's a move into direct representation that comes with the *Tory Wives* (the watercolour pencil drawings in the show) being public figures that feels somewhat different from your earlier work with a cast of people that you know personally.

JB: Although I have used public, Googleable figures quite a lot in the past. As with the screenprinted wallpaper, *All Tomorrow's Afterparties* [2007], which has a lot of very recognisable figures. I actually think that this current body of work is going to lead me to make more wallpaper.

MdP: So there seem to be certain curatorial strategies at play here, where you might think of certain works, particularly wallbased works, especially if they are not framed or flat to the wall in some way, as taking on the role of background, or landscape. Against this, the sculptural works become foregrounded.

JB: I'm interested in the relationship between the images and objects, where a drawing set behind a sculpture becomes like a theatrical backdrop.

MdP: And that interests me because, although you have used direct representations of public figures before, it seems to me that is this consistently in this backdrop role.

JB: Maybe that is what it's about - they provide signposts of some kind. Particularly in the case of a wallpaper like *Give me Your Blacklisted* [2006], featuring historical figures, which is teasing out connections, narratives and bits of old news.

MdP: So it's a storytelling device. The background in terms of a character's

background. That's interesting, because we have talked about the assemblages having agency. Do you think that there is a different kind of agency, or no agency even, in these more depictive works?

JB: Maybe it's a different kind of agency. With the watercolour drawings of the (Tory) wives, there is quite a deliberate choice of cropping.

MdP: That's *your* agency. And the wives are in positions of relative powerlessness as well, aren't they? Or at least they are potentially being steered by their husbands, the photographer, expectation, convention etc...

JB: Potentially. There are several layers of positioning going on with the wives. And there is some possible repositioning going on that I'm doing, and an uncomfortable engagement with the idea of empathy for them if I feel like they're kind of complicit in things that I don't like.

MdP: Do you see them as weak people?

JB: No, I don't think so. I think that because they are semi-public figures I don't have strong feelings in terms of seeing them as [victims]. I'm not that sure yet about them. Something new is happening with my relationship to this work that has happened before in bits in works like the wallpaper. But I'm not sure yet. I think that it sometimes takes time for me to know.