

Vicky Browne: Accidental Procedures

When I met Vicky Browne to talk about *Accidental Procedures*, she appeared in a galactic T-shirt: black with small, floating stars and planets. Although she insisted it was an accident, it seemed to affirm the theme of the show, and furthermore her preoccupation with all things cosmic. Indeed accidents are essential to Browne's work, and while most contemporary artists are familiar with 'practice-based research', Browne experiments with an astonishing range of materials and techniques, both traditional and innovative. For example, the *Accidental Surface* series is an incongruous blend of materials including glass, laser printer toner, and lead. Likewise, her lead-lighting technique developed from a professional course, but her use of gold foil derives from the humble YouTube videos of scrapbookers. Browne's 'procedures' for making only emerge after a period of experiments, accidents and failures, and even then, the final execution is partially determined by chance.

For Browne, the sculptural object is determined by its material qualities. Although not a new concept (echoing the modernist doctrine of 'truth to materials'), her approach has more in common with the counter-modernist histories of women's practices. Her preference for handcrafting, lowly domestic materials, dispersed arrangement and intimate scale, for example, directly contrast with the contained, monumental and uniform sculptures common to modernism. In particular, Browne's methodology recalls that of the sculptor Lynda Benglis, who explained in an interview the importance of "making [one's] own material in order to work", which comes about from "mixing, cooking... the way things taste... surfaces, chemicals, mixtures and questions about matter...".* Benglis's *matter* is expansive: it is the stuff of rocks, flesh and the universe. Her flowing, bulbous, latex and polyurethane foam sculptures of the '60s and '70s reacted in particular to minimalist sculpture, which maintained a deliberate separation from the natural environment by imposing geometric order onto matter. Questions of matter also dominate Browne's practice, but her specific desire is to *animate* matter through movement, sound and light. By exhibiting matter as vital and continuous (rather than dead or wholly instrumentalised), Browne affirms Jane Bennett's argument in *Vibrant Matter*, that doing so may encourage a greater ecological sensitivity in the beholder, and spark the potential for "materially sustainable modes of production and consumption."**

Browne makes matter sing. Fashioned lovingly from clay, glass, polycarbonate and wood, her sculptures form a motley, improvised choir, and just like a choir, each sculpture has a role. Jingling, whirring and spinning, Browne's installations celebrate matter (both grand and ignoble) as the stuff that binds us with each other and the cosmos. The floating sculptures of *Accidental Procedures* imply this metaphorically and formally. The dusty, pock-marked faces of the *Accidental Surface* series and the course, round cavities of the *Handmade Portals* approximate planetary craters, while their arrangement in space maps an imaginary arc of celestial bodies. All matter in the universe is animated by a measure of heat energy, and appropriately, the objects in this exhibition are dependent on heat-based procedures, whether it is firing the stoneware for the hanging bells or *Handmade Portals*, or adhering laser toner or gold foil with a heat press. Through these accidental procedures, Browne subtly cautions us that the exponential heating of our own planet is determined by human procedures and the ongoing treatment of matter as lifeless, endlessly abundant, and expendable.

Jaime Tsai, 2017

* Lynda Benglis, 'Whitney Focus Presents Lynda Benglis', *Whitney Museum of American Art* (accessed 29/7/2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yq7VklUhY18>

** Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) ix