

How to be somebody

Emma Hart's sculptures are coming for you. Moulded into the guise of everyday objects, previously ranging from banal clipboards and suburban satellite dishes to surreal comic book speech bubbles, her fired clay gestures protrude from walls getting in your face and into your space. Hart's new series of sculptures for her first solo exhibition at The Sunday Painter continue to appear somewhat unruly and impolite, while adopting a more aggressive or impatient tone. A row of table tennis bats with extended handles hinge from the walls like bendy arms dangling in the air about to land a punch. Or perhaps a slap. Or a swat. Alongside them a series of megaphones with mouthpieces jutting out from the wall seemingly shout (inaudibly) through their amplifying cones. The megaphone sculptures are succinct conceptual gestures performing the action of the objects they depict. When discussing them in her studio Hart drills down into these sculptural fragments further: they're not a description of an object, but a physical manifestation of the verb, insisting "it's not a sculpture of a megaphone, it's a sculpture of what a megaphone does". Her attention to detail, distinguishing between the noun and the verb, sets out the vocabulary for this whole new body of work which deflects and reflects meaning in different directions.

It seems almost impossible that these irreverent objects can be conjured from clay, their material precision and unlikely mode of display seems to defy my own expectations of what a ceramic sculpture might look like or 'do'. In the same way the bendy arms of her table tennis bats thrust viewers around the room, Hart forces clay to misbehave and take its most reluctant form. She tells me clay just wants to be a mug, or a bowl, or any smooth domestic vessel. Instead she pushes her material to its limit, innately knowing its malleable qualities yet testing her own technical skills to achieve the impossible and create objects that are precarious and awkward to display, and invariably don't lend themselves so easily to moulding, glazing and firing in a kiln. Hart is a serial avoider of plinths which "separate the artworks from the viewers world", and instead allows her sculptures of everyday fragments to occupy blank walls, almost always at head height, so they can "expand in the mind of the viewer and get in their world". The formal simplicity of her sculptures contradict the technically complex innovation involved in their making. But maybe that's part of the visual trick.

Hart's sculptures, particularly her speech bubbles, enact a duplicitous performance of saying one thing and doing another. Meeting Emma in her studio in March, and then again in September, bookended an extended conversation on the politics of class in contemporary art, and the contradictory state of being both inside and outside at the same time, to be immersed within a community yet alienated from it, and then again dislocated from any original sense of belonging you'd hope to find in the warm bubble of family and friends who were part of your life before you entered The Art World. I'm not sure I can find the right words for it. Other than that like Emma I was the first member of my family to have any access to higher education and somehow ended working in a profession in which I often feel like a trojan horse who infiltrated a community in which I seemingly 'pass' on the outside, but on the flipside am actively excluded from the structures of power I'm ingratiated within, while also emotionally distanced from my inherited class background.

Emma passes on to me some recommended reading on this double-bind, specifically on French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'split habitus' which diagnoses the emotional imprint of social mobility on individuals or class 'transfuges' who are caught in a painful position of social limbo, of 'double isolation', from both their origin and class destination via education. Drawing on the psychoanalytic notion of 'splitting of the self' Bourdieu noted that a dislocation of habitus and field could produce a painfully fragmented self, a habitus clivé. It's a useful idea for understanding how the emotional pull of class loyalties can entangle individual subjects in the affinities of the past over the course of a lifetime, and in many ways succinctly encapsulates the visual contradictions and verbal ambiguities played out in Hart's ongoing series of speech bubbles.

Hart shows me recent versions of these two-faced motifs in her studio, across which are inscribed her ambivalence towards her own experience of upward mobility. They're constructed as a kind of speech sandwich, two glossy white slices of clay joining in the middle, and then parting ways to adhere to the wall. The comma-like stem of the bubble sticks out into the space like a nose, viewed straight-on it's difficult to see the full phrase at once. These quasi-anthropomorphic impressions of speech in action speak to us ambiguously, saying 'no no' or 'lie', both extended on the reverse side with a single hand-written 's'. Previous speech bubbles have asked questions, but these versions seem to give bad answers, or perhaps 'no' becomes 'nose' when seen from both sides. Hart reckons with her own experience of split habitus through slippages of word play, allowing speech to suggest and obscure meaning by playing with the visual gesture of a fold. The bubbles describe two sides of the same coin, each saying one thing but perhaps feeling another. They both conceal and reveal how speech produces the individual subject, while at the same time risk giving you (and your class position) away.

Two-faced gestures also underpin Hart's new series of megaphones which further play with notions of self (re)production but via the reduced grammar of digital rather than verbal speech. From the aperture at each end the trumpeting 'loud hailer' emerges a face, the same face that speaks into it. These quasi-emoji designs appear on banal stock-image patterned backgrounds, ranging from checkerboards to stripes and fluffy white clouds, repeating from inside the hollows of the megaphones and behind each mouthpiece stuck to the wall. The repetition of these blank faces suggests the monotony of self-broadcasting, either in-person by actual people or via digital avatars endlessly repeating and reproducing images of themselves within the social media vacuum. Hart's featureless painted faces could also be read as placeholders, set against the decorative motifs of stock image photographs, ubiquitous to the point where we eventually stop looking, or so banal you might see your own image in its place.

Downstairs, Hart transforms clay slabs into a series of domestic wall mirrors, out from which grow heads and shoulders twisting around to look at their glossy reflections. By merging each mirror panel with the fragmented outline of a body, Hart creates uncanny anthropomorphic forms which elegantly conflate the act of looking with the moment of recognition. The reflective quality of ceramic lustre is exploited by Hart to describe this fleeting psychological act of perception and recognition, where the iridescent glaze surface catches the figure looking at itself. Subtle details also reinforce these ceramics as once functional mirrors, the edges flash green like cut glass and exaggerated dome-head screws locate the mirror in the home, probably the bathroom, this is further indicated by one or two hanging from lengths of chain. Dome-head screws join with the morphing torsos as they stretch out from the wall. Stuck to the body they become incorporated as physical appendages, possibly nipples or breasts or Adam's apples. The over-sized round faces admiring their own likeness are angular in shape, they have been crudely cropped and reduced to conform with the outline of their reflection. Hart's sculptural shaping is intentionally blunt. The limits of the mirror determine the limits of the body, each figure cannot exist beyond its doubled glossy image.

These sculptures evoke the performance of self. When we peer over their shoulders, do we see ourselves in the reflected qualities of their image? Is it us we're seeing or someone else in our reflection, and to what extent are we constituted by what we see, how we look, what we say and do? The title of the show, much like many of Hart's word games, is firmly tongue in cheek, the aspirational imperative of Be Some Body suggesting it's easier to be any body other than truly yourself.

Amy Budd, 2020