

Interview with Jack O'Brien

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A collection of miscellaneous objects and tools lay within your studio, along with an army of wine bottles and wine glasses lined up on the windowsill - you have amassed quite a lot! Could you tell me more about your selection process, do you have a system for collecting?

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There's quite a specific process to how I select and collect objects, in some bodies of work it has been about whether the object has a particular symbolic weight or impact, and what this might mean when the object is multiplied or combined in different iterations. In the past year or so I've been collecting wine glasses, I use them in my practice almost as sketches or maquettes. They help to formulate ideas and to unpack larger questions in my work, such as understanding material limits and the complex, often charged relationships between objects and images.

As well as practical objects, fashion items are also incorporated within the work. Levis jeans encased by glass bowls, socks elongated into bodily forms. What significance does fashion have on the work?

I'm interested in the fraught and complex histories behind certain items of clothing, and how their place in culture has evolved. An example I often come back to is the white shirt. If you look at its early place in society; it was used as a signifier of wealth due to the fact it had to remain pristine and white, this was how the term 'white collar worker' came about. I see the shirt as a violent emblem of our past, present and future, it's an object loaded with a multitude of connotations from being a marker of capitalism to a signifier of 'purity' and religion. Fashion and clothing provide a space to explore the human experience from multiple angles, while also being a tool to unearth our interpersonal relationships. On the one hand, these objects are otherworldly symbols draped on models in the pages of magazines and in Instagram adverts but on the other hand we all have personal experiences with textiles, whether that's with our favourite pair of jeans, leather rubbing against us in the sex club or the knitted blankets we had as babies, we've connected with these strands and fibres and left our own impressions on them. I think there are bigger questions that I am interested in, or at least, fashion and clothing become one of the many ways to explore this.



Said something, 2022, Wine bottle, Shrink-wrap, Crowbars. 30 x 14 x 110cm

You mentioned there are 'bigger questions' you are interested in exploring, what may they be?

I think I'm realising more and more that there is a larger network at play in my practice, on the one hand, it might be about reading into the sensual or violent experiences we have in the world. While actually, I think I'm exploring the reasoning behind why we make these associations, why certain materials or gestures might instil a particular feeling or association, and how these associations have come to be.

Objects move through states of clarity and confusion, with minimal gestures. Would you say the process of abstraction derives from the object itself or do you have a structure in mind beforehand?

I would say there is a set of rules that kind of play out. It might be our relationship to space, the surrounding architecture or a sense of symmetry and order; these inherent 'rules' dictate a set of parameters, which form a good basis to push back against. I do this through using abstract gestures and irrational decision-making, often just with intuition; and indulging in that sense of collapse. Recently as the work has felt 'quicker' I have tried to instill a sense of temporality and lightness. A piece can be made with the slightest of motions. It might be only two or three gestures that could alter the 'DNA' of an object, even if that simply means turning it upside down. I also use gestures that have a sense of familiarity to them. The shirt is buttoned up to the collar and hung on a hook in the wall, or the glass is placed how you'd arrange it on a table. The gestures are rooted in everyday experience, which allows for the object to be pushed into more baroque, abstract or absurd combinations, such as a reference to tudor ruffs or the petals of an orchid.

There is definitely a familiarity in the work and of course, we always bring our lived experiences to what we see; therefore, various personal associations can be activated by the objects you work with. What are your thoughts on this?

We have seen a wine glass smash, we know the sound of that, if you have ever been cut by glass, you can remember the sharp cold feeling before you start to bleed. I want to play with that visceral experience of those associations, the objects are pushed into this really uncomfortable place, and there's a tension with that tipping point. I want the work to feel loaded with our desires - there's an electric energy to the clashes between the materials, like how a bottle mouth is holding a steel fence post spike. The materials are pushed to the edge, and the objects are stretched to their limits and nearing collapse, all these associations become evermore excruciating because more often than not, we know the feeling or the function of them.



Drummer, 2021, (Wire Fencing Roll, Muslin, Concrete, Thread Rod, Glass Wax, Football Socks, Steel.) 0.3 x 1 x 3m, at Ginny on Frederick

The majority of the materials you work with don't strike me as easy to manipulate - they all feel quite stubborn. How does material resistance play into the work?

In a similar way to how I think about the symbolic weight of objects, I also respond to the limitations of certain materials, through testing to see how far they can be pushed, by finding the correct temperature of glass-wax that will bleed through a pair of socks, or stretching a leather jacket sleeve and filling it's underlining with concrete to a point where the stitches can only hold a certain amount of material. Recently I've started using shrink-wrap, which acts almost as a 'flattener'. A method to engulf and consume objects. Near my studio, there was a company wrapping furniture and vehicles to be shipped around the world. I can't help but think this process might have stemmed from gazing out there. There's a uniformity to this hermetic sealing, the plastic becomes a skin and morphs around the structure of the objects.

The physicality of the sculptures seem to punctuate the space around them. You have previously described your work as 'eloquent texts', I wonder if you could explain what you mean by this.

The thing I come back to quite a lot is the idea of punctuation. In many of the new works I think of stoppages, hyphens, commas or breaks, the wine bottles become a lens and in their multiplicity, they become an ever-expanding punctuated network. Once repeated the bottle lens acts as a unifier, a tool to draw disparate materials together. There are formalities and constraints to language, and as we've discussed this also applies to objects, images and materials; so a relationship to text makes sense to me. I see each component of the work as lines within a book, or as texted conversations, scrawled notes, and screamed points - there's a correspondence at hand, and the work with all of its punctuation attempts to align and order this.



Mutual Debt, 2022, Wineglasses, Leather belt. 49 x 9 x 9cm

The 'lens' wine bottle and various other motifs are repeated within the work and as a result, you have built a distinct language in your practice. With many exciting exhibitions in the pipeline, how do you see these individual motifs converging on a larger scale in the future?

The works made this year have a direct relationship to the scale of the body - my body, as do the objects that relate to a sense of domesticity or my lived experiences. I often find these parameters are shaped by this moment, in London, with spatial, monetary and time constraints. I'm interested to see how scaling up could affect the work, whether that's with the physicality of materials or mass and multitudes of them. I think there is a network at play already with the disparate elements in my practice; letting these play out on a larger scale will bring about new and complex questions I'm excited to answer.