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Jack O'Brien's Big Reward

The power and the glory holes of the young sculptor currently drawing gazes to London's Camden Art Centre.

The past few decades have brought more changes to London's urban landscape than any since the Victorian era. Industrial buildings and council flats have been razed and replaced with gleaming high-rises which the architecture critic Ian Martin called "improbable sex toys poking gormlessly into the air." Meanwhile, skyrocketing rents have screwed over all but the wealthiest. It's been both a difficult and exciting time to be a young artist in the city, according to Jack O'Brien, the 31-year-old sculptor who has lately been the talk of the town. He's marking a decade of living in London with his first museum show in the city, an ambitious installation at Camden Art Centre – part of the institution's Emerging Artist Prize – that he says is all about the UK capital's transformation. "My method of making is reflective of the city's instability," he says.

This may not be readily apparent from 'The Reward', the show's monumental, titular work, though it has an unavoidable air of precarity. A pair of five-metre spiral staircases have been laid on their side and suspended in parallel at eye level. Adorned with partially-melted silver baubles and wrapped in sheer, fleshy stockinette, they resemble elements of Camden's Victorian building dressed up in drag. A complicated feat of engineering, the staircases had to be specially made by an industrial fabricator to safely hang from the museum's antique beams. O'Brien, who often suspends his sculptures, recalls seeing similar staircases on the exterior of the artist lofts in South Bermondsey where he long kept a studio – an area that since has been unrecognisably gentrified. Their sinuously curved forms, coupled with the mirrored balls – repurposed Christmas ornaments that variously recall gigantic pearls or anal beads – invoke the contrasts in London's built environment, from dusty imperial facades to glossy new builds. "I'm interested in these decaying monuments," O'Brien explains. "Especially with these baroque Victorian materials, there's an unavoidable sense of Britishness. When something feels too oversaturated, I just barge right into it." It's an approach unafraid to indulge in a bit of camp sensibility: 'The Reward' is Oliver Twist meets Auntie Mame.

Decaying Victorian architecture has been a persistent presence in O'Brien's life, as it is for so many across England. He attended primary school in a building not unlike Camden Art Centre, which was formerly Hampstead Central Library, completed in 1897. O'Brien's primary school was in Lincolnshire, where he lived before moving with his family to Suffolk in his early teens. As a gay kid with big city aspirations, London was an inevitable draw and O'Brien relocated there in 2011 to study art at Kingston University. Some of his earliest sculptures incorporate materials such as latex, leather and denim, from the gay club and fetish scenes he first encountered there. Stockinette, he notes, is produced to sheathe archival garments, polish cars and soften upholstery; it's also employed by butchers for bundling meat. Like suspension, wrapping is a favourite method of O'Brien's, as a gesture tied both to labour and to kink. The Camden Art Centre prize was the result of his solo presentation at last year's Frieze London, where the booth of London gallery Ginny on Frederick featured a 19th century horse carriage swaddled in cellophane.

"Jack's work, which was unknown to me at that point, set up a tension between materials, objects, and their encoded meanings and sensibilities, that felt charged and energised," says Gina Buenfeld-Murley, curator at Camden Art Centre, who participated in the jury. As for the striking use of so much cling film, O'Brien notes that the material "is something so rooted in everyday life, whether that's wrapping food or stuff at the airport or some kind of erotic mummification," he says. "But the use of it was also about pushing these disparate materials to a tense state of abstraction, while allowing for moments of legibility so you can still read parts of the objects, which are mostly intact." Beneath dense layers of translucent plastic, the carriage was still recognisable, even as it looked primed to be eaten by an improbably large spider.

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O'Brien recalls that during the installation of his sculpture 'Volent' at Frieze, the cling film became something of a running joke as artworks in neighbouring booths were uncrated. "Some gallerists were like, 'Oh, are you gonna unwrap it?'" he laughs. "I kind of love it [also] being a slight gag about the global art trade." Between its proliferating fairs and jet-setting crowd, that trade produces a significant amount of waste, not least from things like cellophane wrapping. O'Brien is well aware of this. His cling film is permanent, whether or not it will gracefully age. "You can barge into the toxicity of the commercial art world and at the same time critique it from within," he notes. And there was something undeniably cheeky about the presence of 'Volent' in the fair's emerging artist section, where it strongly resembled a cocoon.

But if O'Brien has lately hatched onto Frieze Week marquees, it's because of his light touch with materials. In his bundled sculptures, all sorts of quotidian objects – cellos, coat racks, spoons, bannisters – become something wholly different, despite retaining their original forms. Call it artistic metamorphosis. It's an approach he says was partially inspired by sculptors like Tom Burr and Marc Camille Chaimowicz, whose works deploy items of clothing and décor in queer-coded abstractions. Two cryptic sculptures by O'Brien at Camden, 'Slew' and 'Hearted', achieve similar aims. Glass panels have been removed from a pair of antique, wooden display cases – a Victorian museum's, perhaps – and filled with steel bollards and severed trumpet horns, heaped up on their sides. There's something profoundly emasculating about all those bollards ripped from the ground and brass instruments that can no longer be blown. A dissection of the straight male ego, maybe, that built so many of London's institutions.

All of O'Brien's sculptures, including 'The Reward', come apart fairly easily. He says that's largely due to the limitations of tight budgets and cramped, shared studio spaces. The Camden commission included funding and a vaulted, church-like gallery, but O'Brien still likes to keep things lean. It's a restriction that opens up other kinds of possibilities. For one thing, it lends his sculptures their precariousness. For another, materials with real-world uses are primed for double entendre. O'Brien says he thinks of this potential a little bit like cruising: "The perfectly manicured rose garden in Hyde Park becomes something inherently human when it's used for public sex. Its structure gets split apart by desire lines." As spare and glossy as O'Brien's work can sometimes seem, there are lots of imperfections if you only look at them closely: stains and runs in the stockinette, burn marks from a welding torch on the metal. "Those ephemeral marks that pull it away from something polished and fixed," he says, "are like parts of the city that get sold as clean, idealised urban spaces, and the lived experience of them, which often doesn't line up with that."

In The Reward, however, things do conspicuously line up. O'Brien has covered most of the vaulted gallery's Victorian glass window panes with sheets of frosted Perspex, attached by nipple-like suction cups. Most, save a strip around the perimeter roughly at eye level, which syncs up with the height of the staircases. It's a horizon line that looks out onto sterile new luxury flats or the weatherbeaten shops of Finchley Road, depending on which way you turn. The light from that horizon beams through the hollow poles of the staircases, occasionally catching your eye. It feels slightly naughty peering down at them, like looking into a glory hole – especially when a stranger surprises you from the other side.

Credits
Text: Evan Moffitt
Photography: William E. Wright