



Objects of touch & travel...

Frances Priest

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6-30 May 2009

Private View

Tuesday 5 May 2009

6.30-8.30 pm

Meet the Artist

An opportunity to meet Frances Priest for an informal discussion and chance to handle the objects in the exhibition. Please call the gallery as places are limited.

Thursday 21 May

6.30-7.30 pm

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Handled objects are not idle bystanders: they are participating in the process of expression.ⁱ

Like many of his contemporaries, the late Sigmund Freud was an avid collector of antiquities. In fact, over the course of 40 years he amassed a collection of more than 2000 - mostly figurative - objects, a small selection of which were arranged on the desk in his study. Sitting alongside more obvious desk-occupying objects - among them, cigar cases, ashtrays, paperweights and magnifying glasses - this distilled selection of sculptural pieces, was evidence, Freud believed, of the Ancients' ability to make tangible that which remains essentially abstract: the workings of the human mind. Indeed, such was his fascination that while speaking - as well as listening - to his patients, Freud regularly handled many of the objects on his desk. Whether absent-mindedly or consciously, his habit reflected a desire to engage the object in a relationship between internal dialogue and speech, whereby handling became a means of engagement.

This sort of habit is one that artist Frances Priest is keen to encourage through her latest body of work. Indeed, the sense that these ceramic objects can only be truly understood by touching them is almost tangible. Ambiguously shaped ceramic forms are arranged around her studio much like those on Freud's desk - loosely, yet with deliberate care. Diamond shapes climb up and across walls, tall tubes usher you in to the room, and a family of slightly silly objects wobble on the shelves as if refusing to be stacked. Under the surface of these static objects, a sense of movement is permanently present, yet their functions - if that term is appropriate - remain hidden and unresolved, as if the potential handler could alter their state merely by touching them. These 3-dimensional shapes seem curiously intimate; in some cases their very scale appears purposely designed for the human hand. For against the mass manufactured objects we increasingly encounter - the plastic toys hailing from anonymous Chinese cities, the generic cotton t-shirts stocked in every high street chain, or the identical white ceramic breakfast bowls from Ikea - which betray no trace of their production processes, no sense of their origins; Priest's objects are instead deliberately open-ended, as if inviting the handler to engage them in a conversation.

Generating conversations with and about objects seems particularly poignant in light of a recent Crafts Council study which revealed that 85% of primary school children can use a keyboard but only half that number can chop carrots.ⁱⁱ An interactive experience now seems less about raw material and process, and more about touch-sensitive computer screens. And yet, the relationship between our hands and brain

is one that cannot be satisfied by the mere click of the mouse. By examining the physical and material conditions of an object, the hand intimately experiences more than just surface. Through touch, our hands connect our brains to the world; indeed, like Freud's desk of handleable antiquities, objects can be used to think with.

To a certain extent, the gradual loss of these manual skills can be attributed to an increasingly fragmented experience of the life of objects themselves. As ever larger quantities of material and consumable goods are manufactured and produced beyond our own borders, our experience of the production process has, in turn, become equally fragmented. As if by magic, objects appear readymade in our shops, thus severing the traditional ties between users and skills, and limiting our ability to actively engage with objects. Yet could the craft object be in a position to re-connect this fragmented process, and bring a sense of 'wholeness' back to our relationship with objects?

In many ways, Priests' work seems to address these same issues of fragmentation. While the toys from China, the t-shirts and generic bowls are complete statements - meaning that our experiences of them are effectively preconditioned - elements of Priest's 'open' objects, such as placement, context and association, can be constructed and reconstructed by the handler. In this way, Priest's work becomes a platform whereby the artist, handler, material and process are able to continually engage in a relationship between thinking and touching. Clearly, the creative conversation contains many voices.

Ellie Herring, May 2009

i Michael Molnar, Freud's Sculpture, Exhibition Catalogue, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2006, p. 20.

ii The Crafts Council



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