

## THE MATERIALS ARE THE MESSAGE

By Paul Carey-Kent

Much modern art uses unusual materials. The primacy of paint, canvas and marble are long gone. Often the material feeds into the narrative or the politics of the work, as well as contributing to its aesthetic. Another shift, in line with the changing nature of our wider social engagement with the environment, is a movement from materials as means towards an investment in materials for their own sake. The material qualities of stone and paint were, of course, central to the art of – for example – Michelangelo and Turner: they respected and engaged with them, they influenced their results and were a crucial part of their success. And yet... the origins and use of those materials were not matters of importance for the art: they were essentially employed as the best available means to deliver what Michelangelo and Turner wanted to express. The materials were the means to expression, not part of its end. Carl Andre is the modern artist who represents the difference most fully: such works as his 'timber pieces' – made from railway sleepers – or the notorious firebricks of 'Equivalent VIII', 1966, simplify form in order to foreground the materials from which the work is made, pointing to their inherent but easily-overlooked qualities. Not so much 'found objects' as 'found merits'.

In 'From Nature,' seven contemporary artists from around the world use materials as central contributors to how the work finds meaning, and do so with a radical respect for the materials themselves. Where they move beyond Andre is in responding not just to the materials, but to the critical shift in our perception of the environment since the 1960's, to the increasingly evident realities of man's impact on nature and the consequent need to act more responsibly. Susan Owens, in her recent book 'Spirit of Place', reviews the history of our interactions with the land, showing how not just the views but also our changing relationship to natural resources over the centuries feed into changing perceptions in art and beyond. The artists in 'From Nature' are part of the Anthropocene chapter of that story.

Take **Jesper Eriksson**. He works with coal, a charged and double-edged material which, as he says, is 'problematic, glorious, scandalous, essential... it has sustained communities and enabled technological progress, all the while polluting and harming health of those who work it'. That led him to make the point that 'it is the carbon dioxide released from burning which is at fault, not the material itself. Imagine it was mined as a building material, rather than as an energy source.' For building material, read sculptural material. As such, coal is displayed, Andre-style, to draw attention to its easily overlooked beauty, its value beyond the problematic history of its destruction for humanity's short-term gain. Eriksson calls attention to the environmental

agenda, effectively memorialising climate change and pointing – through the title ‘Carbon Offset’ – to the potentially flawed logic of ‘offsetting’ carbon emissions by making payments. Eriksson’s stacks, incidentally, resemble the tradition of cairns, but the form also has a recent art usage in Ugo Rondinone’s ‘mountains’ series of hyper-coloured day-glow-painted rocks, which flaunt the artist’s intervention where Eriksson keeps his input in the background.

**Nienke Hoogvliet** and her studio generate value from the least likely materials: seaweed (woven), algae (turned into yarn) and – in ‘From Nature’ – used toilet paper and sewerage wastewater. The ‘Waterschatten’ range of furniture and homeware is made from reclaimed and recycled toilet paper: some 180,000 tonnes is flushed down Dutch toilets each year, likely equating to over 600,000 tonnes in the UK. A recent Dutch innovation uses fine sieves to collect the paper as a cellulose – saving trees through the recycling achieved. The Chinese textile industry is environmentally problematic for two reasons: first the scale of production (80 billion garments per year), driven by the readiness of consumers to throw cheap clothes away; second, the pollution of most of China’s rivers with chemicals from the wastewater released by textile dye factories. The Kaumera Kimono tackles both issues: the choice of garment is a statement against ‘fast fashion’, as kimonos are traditionally passed on for generations. And these kimonos are made with dyes – Kaumera is one - produced from the textile industry’s wastewater. What’s needed, Hoogvliet makes apparent, is a more balanced valuation of clothes, taking account of sustainability as well as price and trends. Her recycling of materials to design ends succeeds in both calling attention to environmental issues; and taking direct action to improve matters, through how the work is made.

In their explorations of new languages of craft, **Forest & Found** - Max Bainbridge and Abigail Booth in collaboration - use traditional techniques to create art from found and reclaimed material. They work independently to produce joint installations linked by the exploration of identity and place through expanded material histories and handwork. Bainbridge’s titles, like Eriksson’s, emphasise the story of his materials: the ‘Land Jars’ are made from storm-felled sections of ash trees, which are both of the land and a defining part of the British landscape – albeit one threatened by dieback. Bainbridge turns and hollows out the sections – one burnished, one burnt – through the end grain of the wood to mirror the central trunk of the tree, so that the width of each jar is indicative of the diameter of the tree from which it was carved. This elegant manoeuvre might be related to Giuseppe Penone’s well-known series (from 1969 onwards) in which he scrapes away the wood from a felled tree to reveal its internal structure of narrow core and developing branches, uncovering the process of growth. Bainbridge conjures a similar sense of connection to the origin of the tree, a discovery within the wood of the essence of its being. Abigail Booth’s works also generate power through their materials. The cloth she uses for ‘In Dreams (Dormir)’, for example, is a mixture of cottons, some of them ‘burnt’ by baking in a domestic oven. The chequered pattern enables Booth to contrast the ‘raw’ and ‘cooked’ sections

– to borrow Levi-Strauss’s distinction with its relevant evocation of the analysis of myth. The pigment painted onto the cloth is made from wood-fired cow bones ground and mixed with linseed and beeswax. Booth emphasises that the bones - a discarded by-product of the cattle industry – are not just the last tangible presence of the animal itself, but as calcined bone are actually no different from, and so evocative of, human bone. Her title, though, comes not from the material but from its associations: suggesting that we are looking at a quilt, under which we sleep and dream. Quilts are, perhaps, the leading western exemplar of utilitarian items, not made as art but now seen in those terms. Booth reverses the direction of historical movement, from art to quilt rather than from quilt to art so that – in common with Bainbridge’s jars – she implies the dream of returning to the past state of balance and harmony with the environment.

British-Taiwanese artist **Rain Wu**’s series of fictional maps calls attention to the subjectivity of cartography, which inevitably encodes the ideological views of its makers – historically, an agenda of domination. Moreover, Wu cites Jean Baudrillard’s concept of Hyperreality – that representations can take over from reality – as pointing to ‘how representations (maps) and their original objects (place) have a mutual influence on one another’, adding that ‘there is more imagination than there are facts on a map’. Wu’s maps reference that through their fugitive nature: those in ‘The Sea Rises and Totally Still’ – first shown outdoors on an archipelago in Finland in 2019 - are drawn on stretches of blue fabric with seawater and chalk, so that their markings fade away on exposure to the atmosphere. Wu foregrounds a disappearance which reminds us not only of our own temporality, but also of our composition: not only is 60% of the human body water, but 0.4% of its weight is sodium chloride at a concentration pretty well equivalent to that in seawater. Such a mapping amounts to the opposite of domination, an act of reconciliation with nature by drawing directly from it and allowing the artwork to dissolve back into the landscape. A shift, we may infer, which needs to go well beyond maps.

**Peter Matthews** works – literally – with the sea: he paints at the edge of the world’s oceans with the materials he can carry on his back, his canvas often doubling up as sunscreen, roof or hammock, even drawing underwater so that, as he puts it, ‘the sea is depicting the sea itself’. All manner of coastal materials may find their way onto his paintings as he records what he experiences in a stream-of-consciousness manner: in the case of ‘Emerge’, sand, stones, a grass reed, flower petals and a cuttlefish bone from the Atlantic coast of Cornwall contribute to his radical means of mapping the ocean. Moreover, Peter’s ‘making of’ film – shown alongside the paintings – puts us right there with him. Matthews’ paintings enact something we evidently need more of: a balance between man and nature. That balance models a form of behaviour in which humankind collaborates with nature, accepting his place in it, rather than seeking to conquer it. And by way of what may seem a bonus – but is actually an integrated tribute to natural beauty – the resulting paintings are seductively attractive. ‘Emerge’ uses a restrained palette which enables the small pools of sea-suggestive blue to gleam from a composition which can be read as both a topography - perhaps of water courses - or a riff on the modernist grid which is so central to the history of abstract painting.

Harriet Hellman also films herself at the coast – in Devon, where she records her process of working with clay in a performative interaction with the landscape. She describes that as ‘trying to capture place, space and time and the energy of the moment’ so that ‘the physicality of the coastline embeds itself in the clay, layering a new narrative’ which is ‘both immediate and meditative’. Sometimes Hellman leaves her work on site - returning some days later to see what has changed, regarding the transformation as a ‘gift from the sea’. The title of ‘Anthropocene’ points to a concern for ecological fragility, which she finds powerfully present and concerning in coastal erosion and rising sea levels. Not only is clay a particularly suitable material to express those concerns, being of the earth, but the final fired form of her ceramic sculptures evoke geological formations, as if the deep history of the land feeds directly into the work it inspires. It does so with a notable sense of flow, reminding us that the formation of the coastal landscape is rooted in the erosive action of waves. No wonder Hellman’s titles tend to reference deep time as well as the current acceleration of its processes.

Australian artist **Jamie North** calls his sculpture ‘Forward Projection’. The top of what looks like a time-weathered column does indeed project forward in a paradoxical manner which must once have been out of balance: what can the column have originally looked like? The shifted column refers to a tipping point or the crossing of an ecological threshold resulting in a new systemic direction. And the title suggests that we are looking at a forecast of what is to come: archetypal industrial materials - concrete, blast furnace slag, steel - play host in their distressed state to ferns and ivy. Todd McMillan points out that, though we think of columns as support structures, North’s column ‘appears defeated, created to be always and already broken. Yet, in its decrepitude, it retains its function of support... That which appears in the process of decay has provided a home for native species to thrive.’ The world, it seems, will survive the passing phase of humanity and absorb its history into a new order.

The world’s leading myrmecologist, E.O. Wilson, has put that and us into perspective as follows: ‘If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos.’ Just now the former scenario seems all too probable, but if ‘Forward Projection’ is a warning, perhaps we can take the actions needed to avert the endgame which North elicits. The artists of ‘From Nature’ provide a double contribution towards those actions: not only do they point to some of the ways in which we might start, they do so by channeling the aesthetic and conceptual richness which reminds us why – instinctive self-interest aside – humanity is worth preserving.