

FIRST PLINTH

Public art award

Madi Acharya- Baskerville MRSS

Winner 23/24

STRANGE BODIES

by curator and writer, Jes Fernie

Fishing net debris, an old sari, a shoe, bits of tree, plastic bottles, oyster shells, a toy horse – these things are all stored away in boxes on the shelves of Madi Acharya-Baskerville's studio. They whisper to each other in the darkness, exchanging stories about other worlds, nestling into their new surroundings. Sometimes, when they are brought out of their enclosures and begin their life as artworks, they speak directly to the artist: "I don't want that earring you've got in mind for me" or "Yes, you can put me in your exhibition".

This is all part of the joy of Acharya-Baskerville's process. When I enter her studio, which is piled high with life, objects, and artworks, there's a busy, funny, curious atmosphere in which all things, as well as the artist herself, seem to have an equal stake. The alchemy comes when things are brought together in a process of discovery, refusal and good humour. "I have a bond with these objects. They can be in storage for years but I look at them regularly. They tell me when the time is right to bring them out into the world".

Many of these things have been found on beaches, on country walks, or donated by family members (worn-out saris from Acharya-Baskerville's mother are a particularly rich source of booty). They often emanate from the excesses of human consumption and have outlived their purpose. When they are conjoined with alien elements (a jaunty piece of wood found on a stretch of Welsh coastline is dressed in bits of moth-eaten Kashmiri sari and degraded, bejewelled leather spats), their newly forged state creates unruly sculptural forms that are at once pleasing, disturbing and joyful.

Other works refuse this material mashup, insisting that they should be hewn entirely from one entity. The artist listens to their demands and, in the instance of the delightfully named Mr Horniman, she has made heads entirely from clay that sport devilish horns, capacious hollowed-out eyes and a display system that references archaeological museum structures. Along with the beach-combing and the walks, Acharya-Baskerville spends a lot of time in museums thinking through the various ways that forms, cultures and objects move from one place to another, through a process of colonisation, cultural appropriation, migration, exile, and oceanic flow.

FIRST PLINTH: Public Art Award

First Plinth offers sculptors an opportunity to extend their practice into competing for public art commissions. The winning sculptor is awarded £15,000 towards the cost of producing a large-scale sculpture which is exhibited on our sculpture terrace at Dora House. It then transfers to The Art House in Wakefield.

With thanks to the Mirisch and Lebenheim Charitable Foundation for their generous support.

For Caught in the Act, the exhibition at the Royal Society of Sculptors, the artist has employed a range of processes that are new to her, and which have challenged her long-held relationship with materials.

The 180cm sculpture sited in the public space in front of Dora House, called The Double Act, is made of bronze, jesmonite, paint, and bits of old fabric. It has been constructed using various processes including 3D printing, casting, welding and assemblage. For the first time, the artist has had to 'scale up' her artworks – forgoing the 'real thing' (the glove, the shoe) to create a larger version that assumes a monumental form. Viewed by pedestrians, cyclists and drivers – and no doubt employed in various mischievous ways by insects and birds – the work establishes a dialogue between the unruly characteristics of the city (pollutants, noise, movement, people, and opportunistic animals) and the unrelenting effects of rain, sun and wind.

Two bits of wood that resemble legs sport a well-used glove and a huge, louche flower. Feet are encased in traditional, fussy lampshades and a cartoonish red shoe. The plinth upon which the sculpture sits is made from bits of driftwood found on Chesil Beach in Dorset; the original glove from the Welsh coast; and the luxurious, velvet fabric from friends and markets.

Acharya-Baskerville embraces the idea that parts of the sculpture will erode over the two months it is in situ at the Royal Society of Sculptors. "I accept this frailty as a part of my work. I'm open to the idea of potential destruction and understand that my starting point is imperfection and things already used". There's a provocation in this work, along with many others in the exhibition, that seems to pose a series of questions, from the most prosaic "What happens if I put this with this?" to more wide-ranging, philosophical queries: "What or who are we made of?", "How are our bodies – and those of all living and non-living things – implicated in 21st-century life?" and "How can we forge new relations to the world?". The air of melancholy and magic in these sculptures seems to lament, as well as revel in, the idea that we are what we keep and what we throw away, but also what we dream.

There's slapstick and bawdy, goofy good humour too. Look at the titles! Mirrorball Mirrorbust, Mr Horniman, Smiley Smile Crab Face, Caught in the Act, Mr Spillage – they are all delicious lessons in playfulness that exude a world of constellational, rhizomatic possibilities. Indeed, Acharya-Baskerville sees these titles as mini works in their own right. She gets them from songs, things people say, the world around her. In the same way that she scavenges for objects, she appropriates words and language – all material is fair game to her.

Before I leave the artist's studio, I pay close attention to the titles of works written in scrappy hand on the side of boxes. CANARY WARPED / TOPAZ TEARS / THE OWL'S CASTLE / HOLLOW VICTORY / SARI FOREST / NIPPLE CAUGHT. It's like a piece of concrete poetry in cardboard form. The words, the things, the unlikely collisions – they stay with me as I walk back out into the world, seeing things afresh, with humour, curiosity and strangeness.

About

The Royal Society of Sculptors

We champion contemporary sculpture and the artists who create it. We are leading the conversation about sculpture today through exhibitions and events for all, welcoming everyone interested in exploring this art form and its many possibilities. An artist-led, membership organisation, the Society supports and connects sculptors throughout their careers.

sculptors.org.uk

The Art House

The exhibition will transfer to The Art House in Wakefield where artists and audiences of all kinds are invited to engage with the creative process through a year-round programme of residencies, exhibitions, events, workshops, and professional development opportunities. Discover exhibition spaces, on-site accessible accommodation for creatives, a shop, a coffee house, meeting rooms and event spaces for hire.



sculptors.org.uk

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The Double Act, Maquette
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