



Rachel Kneebone — beauty and chaos in motion

A tangle of distorted limbs. Cascading floral garlands. Eruptions of frozen motion. Beauty and chaos coalesce in Rachel Kneebone's cool white porcelain sculptures, producing visceral scenes of psychosexual entropy. Using a hard-paste porcelain that sets quickly, Kneebone relies on assertive touch and instinct to

guide her hand, with little room for indecision. The resulting works are physical incarnations of this impulsive, emotional process, with Kneebone embracing the material's volatile transformation in the kiln to heighten their aura of mutability and flux.

For an aptly-themed online exhibition presented by White

Cube, the British artist is addressing the idea of a pause, neither moving nor still, with three sculptures originally produced for her 2018 Rochdale exhibition. In dialogue with the work of legendary choreographers Merce Cunningham and Mary Wigman, as well as US artist Robert Morris, the balletic poise of writhing limbs in Kneebone's glossy sculptures and accompanying pencil sketches offer the perfect response.

INTERVIEW
Finn Blythe

Finn Blythe: This isn't the first time you've worked with dance. In 2009, you collaborated with Sadler's Wells Theatre on their production of *In The Spirit of Diaghilev*. Did that experience make you want to revisit the world of dance, and did you carry anything over for this exhibition in terms of your approach?

Rachel Kneebone: I already used to go to Sadler's Wells to watch performances, but the invitation to make the poster for the 100th anniversary of *Diaghilev* was a key moment because it meant I had to think about my work through dance. Rather than it being something I used to see and enjoy myself, I had to verbalise what those crossovers and overlaps with dance were. It was a defining point in a way, because I had to make it real in order to explain it to people outside of myself, and that just continued my love of going to ballet and performances. Then in 2018 I was invited to do an exhibition in Rochdale. *The Dance* [Kneebone invited professional dancers as well as local women from Rochdale to create a dance in response to her work] came about because I was trying to think of a way that would encourage people to go and look at art in an environment where maybe that wasn't a dominant activity. I thought if I invited the local women of Rochdale to come and make a performance in response to my work, then people would go and see their mums and sisters and friends when they wouldn't necessarily go to look at just my sculptures. So it's a way of making my work belong to the place in which it was being shown and also extending the idea of dance and movement, which is inherent in my work.

Finn: I'm interested in this cross-disciplinary aspect of your work, particularly the idea of responding to performance. It's something you did in 2017 as well, this time with music and opera when you presented a series of sculptures for Glyndebourne's seasonal programme. Did that add to your ability to translate these performances into your own work?

Rachel: Oh definitely. It's that question isn't it, when someone asks you how long it took you to make something and the truthful answer is: all my life. So up to that point it's like, everything I've experienced, I've responded to through my work. It's like a continuum, so *Diaghilev* and Glyndebourne, everything informs my practice now and changes what I do. That's not to say that mutations don't happen, but I think the big overlap between music, ballet and my sculpture is they're all means of exploring and expressing what it is to be alive in the world without words. It's that visceral thing of being in the body, alive in the world. We have language to try and share and empathise and communicate, but in language there's always a detachment from being in the body and how we experience the world. In some ways, that experience is almost truer through dance, when it is wordless, and through movement.

Finn: So for somebody who doesn't know a lot

about dance or perhaps hasn't ever heard of Merce Cunningham, what makes him special?

Rachel: One of the things that stands out about Merce Cunningham is the way he makes his dances through movement. So the movement begins the movement. He'll make one gesture with his body, move to the next, and then link those two together. So the act of doing becomes the work. It's the same with my making. In the beginning of my practice I would always hunt down a start point, but now that's changed. I just get making and then the act of making produces the work. Cunningham also works a lot around ideas of chance and that's very present in what I do through the chance of how things metamorphose in the kiln. The porcelain will shrink and bend and crack and reform itself in the kiln, which is all out of my control. I can set things up having an idea of what they will do, but there's always that element of chance within what I make, which is really exciting. So there's that connection as well. And again with Robert Morris, who uses the idea of chance with his felt sculptures by slashing the fabric and then propping them against the wall. The form that's created – or anti-form – is to do with gravity. So all those things link the dance, my sculpture and Robert Morris' sculptures.

Finn: That's a really interesting connection with the Morris felts. You not only have the tangled entropy, the chance and volatility – that connection to your work – but also the anthropomorphism of his tangles. I read something very interesting about those tangles, I think it was for an exhibition held at Tate in 2008. Robert Morris was providing instruction to the curator via email over how he wanted the pieces installed. I can't quite remember it verbatim, but it was something along the lines of, "The tangles should be arranged in a pleasing manner." So this idea that no two installations of his tangles will ever be the same is another connection to your porcelain and the way you embrace the unpredictable.

Rachel: And it's also interesting to say, "In a pleasing way", which is almost the least specific direction you could ever give anyone to install something. So that idea of knowing when something's right, when it's pleasing, it's just *right*. It's sort of like that when you're making, too. How you know when to stop or when something's right, it's that visceral sense of knowing when you're making. There's an element where work is thoughtless – never careless – but you make decisions using other senses or judgements that aren't based in reason or rational thought.

Finn: Well that's a good segue to discuss your material. I wanted to ask you about working with the hard-paste porcelain, something that is fairly unforgiving in the sense that it has to be worked very quickly and doesn't really allow for modification. Do you find yourself having to make split-second intuitive decisions in the moment of making or are you executing a preconceived plan?





Rachel: I've always seen my work as a response to the material, an engagement with it. So when I'm making – and this is the bit where it's really hard to explain without sounding weird – but you're not aware of yourself in the activity you're doing. You're just doing the making. So given that I'm not aware of myself making, it's difficult to make judgements and decisions outside of that. When I'm working it's instantaneous, you make judgements and that's part of the process. Obviously the analytical thing happens after or looking back, once you're not actively doing it, you're then questioning things. But when you're making, you're doing. It's more of a physical movement thing.

Finn: I know you often fire your sculptures twice, but sometimes they're also fired in sections and then assembled afterwards. Could you tell me about the production process for these latest sculptures?

Rachel: When you're firing clay or porcelain, it always wants to sit back down on the kiln shelf. You can build a structure up but when it's in the kiln, especially with the second firing, it wants to go back down with gravity, like Robert Morris' felts. So when I was making the dance pieces, rather than making one piece in which everything was connected to each other, I isolated forms, like the ribbon sections, the limbs and other more abstract pieces of porcelain. Rather than fixing them, I just rested them against each other and then I'd use a prop to pile things on for the first firing, the biscuit firing. Then you remove the prop so the limbs or ribbons are airborne and in the second firing you reduce the heat, meaning the porcelain moves down, and in that movement things resting on top would slide or bend or fold. So the reason there's so much movement in the works is because they were borne out of an actual movement in the kiln, when they slid over each other or bent. I really utilised that idea of the shrinkage and the movements through the firing. Then the pieces I made last year, I made by working with sections that were already fired, like even the glaze firing had been done, and then building up that way. They sort of become completely abstract forms that are then reassembled, re-built into another form. It's one of those things that would be easier for me to point out to you in the studio.

Finn: Of course. So if I've understood this correctly, you are utilising the way these sculptures respond to one another inside the kiln?

Rachel: Yes. So normally, say when I made the Glyndebourne work: *Act I*, *Act II* and *Act III*, I started with a splint and I would build up the form, meaning they were each connected. A leg against another leg, against a rose against a vine... Whereas for these works, rather than joining all those things together I've just sort of propped them against each other, knowing they would slide and move and reform themselves, subject to the heat of the kiln. So that's the bit where chance and randomness comes into it.

Of course, I had a rough idea of what they would do because by now I know how porcelain responds to certain conditions, but they were sort of free to form themselves based on that movement. Rather than *me* making movement, the sections moved *themselves* to make the movement.

Finn: I wanted to talk to you about your sketches, which I love. How much time do you spend on each one?

Rachel: That's one of those things – when they're done, they're done. But probably a few hours.

Finn: And you never draw from life?

Rachel: No I don't. If I was to reference then I would look at a single gesture or something but I don't, and also I don't draw before making. So the drawings are very much part of my work but they're not like working drawings.

Finn: They're not plans.

Rachel: Exactly, I don't make the sculptures based on the drawings. When I draw I just suddenly do a lot of drawings and then I don't draw for ages. So it's more of an every now and then thing compared to my making, but I think there's a similar process. When I'm drawing I'm constantly moving the paper around and then rubbing out a lot of it. I'll draw a bit and then squint, almost to see what forms are emerging. Then I start rubbing out some lines and making some forms join other forms – which again goes back to watching performances. On the stage there's an ensemble of bodies that you can create new forms from, depending on how the dancers are posed together. So that's similar to when I'm drawing in that, I'm as much rubbing out lines as drawing them and moving around. It's that overlap again with my making – adding bits on and taking bits away.

Finn: So even though the sketches are not visual guides for when you come to make the sculpture, how would you characterise the dialogue between the two?

Rachel: They're related in terms of looking at form and movement but they're quite separate. Some of the forms that come out when I'm drawing create new ways of seeing things or new forms that I can then make, so there's an exchange but they're not the same thing.

Finn: The conceptual focus of this exhibition centres on the pause, a moment between movement and stillness. I just wanted to ask where you find that moment in the works of Cunningham and Morris?

Rachel: I think there's a stillness in the pause, but then the works are also about movement. Sometimes it's only once we're still that we experience the movement we've just made. That is also in the work. It's like all the movement within my sculptures. It is actually vitrified porcelain so it is still, but then it's that in-between – when the work has that sense that it could be collapsing or being built. So that ambiguity and the transformation between forms,

*Whirl*, 2017

that’s what I mean by the pause, the bit where something is no longer this but not yet that.

Finn: It’s the betwixt and between, it’s the liminal, which is another recurring motif of yours. Sculptures that are somewhere between beauty and chaos, strength and delicacy, figuration and abstraction. What is it about these tensions that appeals to you?

Rachel: Well because in a way, they’re sort of the same. For example, strength and vulnerability, they’re either ends of the same thing. When you’re making about one you’re communicating about the other. With beauty too, you can make something that is so beautiful it’s almost fearful and violent. I think ultimately it’s about exploring life and death. We can’t be alive without knowledge of death and we can’t not fear death because that informs the beauty of life. That idea that it is transient and we are fleeting – that’s why it’s saturated with so much beauty, because it isn’t forever, there is death at the end of it. My work is generally poking around in those areas.

Finn: I’m curious to know a little bit more about your time in the studio. Am I right in saying you rarely work with assistants?

Rachel: I never work with assistants, no. I mean for some of my massive pieces, *399 Days* [a five-metre sculpture made in 2014] and *The Descent* [a sculpture inspired by Dante’s *Inferno* made in 2008], I worked with fabricators because they did the bits I can’t do, like the steel structures for *399 Days*. It’s the same with my wall pieces [presented at Kneebone’s Rochdale exhibition], fabricators did the metal work for that. That doesn’t happen in the studio, but other than that, I work on my own.

Finn: Why is that?

Rachel: Because I never really know what I’m doing [laughs]. It would be pretty difficult to tell someone what to do. So that’s one major problem I have, and in fact that’s the main reason, really. Because it’s not premeditated you can’t really share that bit of it, it’s more of a – I don’t know... hunting for something. I also worry with assistants, because if you had an assistant to do what you might call your boring jobs, then what would become the boring jobs in their wake? Because you always have to have something.

Finn: Do you find there’s a very clear divide between your time in the studio and the rest of your time?

Rachel: Yes and no really, but mostly no. You don’t really switch off, because everything you experience, everything you feel is all part of life and living. Not that my work is autobiographical but, in a way, I sometimes feel I’m like a gauge or a thermometer for my work. Those experiences and things I’ve seen – everything comes out somehow in the work, indirectly or sometimes more directly, like with the dancers. I know some people say that the studio is a state of mind but I don’t because I need a lot

of equipment. So my studio is where my kilns are, where my space is for making and everything sort of happens there, really.

Finn: Given this exhibition responds to dance and movement, I was thinking about the parallels between the dancer’s studio – the rehearsal studio – and the artist’s studio. My dad’s an actor and he would often say that the period in the rehearsal studio is at times almost more enjoyable than the performance itself. Does that hold any meaning for you?

Rachel: It definitely does. My work is about the making and so what I end up with is a sort of side-effect of a process in which all the problem-solving happens. The actual making, that’s the bit I’m driven to do, and then I come out with an object at the end. But like with your dad, it’s how you achieve that, how you create that, how you negotiate that – that’s the bit that keeps you there, the making of it. Which isn’t to make the object lesser, because obviously you are making something beautiful, but it’s the process that’s the exciting bit, I’d say.

Finn: How have you found the experience of preparing for an online exhibition? The format presents challenges for any visual artist but for a sculptor in particular, especially with the detail that’s in your sculptures and the need to see them from all angles. Have you been conscious of these challenges and has it made preparing for this exhibition any different?

Rachel: In lockdown, the best thing to do is to try and focus on what we can do rather than on what we can’t. An online exhibition is what we have at the moment and so it’s about making the best of that and seeing the opportunities. But in general, looking at three-dimensional objects and sculptures in a two-dimensional format is incredibly limiting because how do you understand a work that you can’t look around? Especially with my work, it’s very much about the act of looking. Exploring the cracks and moving around it sort of becomes part of the work. I think with all works there’s something very visceral about how it makes you feel, to experience it in person, and so viewing it online is like shaking someone’s hand with a glove on, you know there’s a disconnect from how the thing really feels. So that’s obviously a disadvantage, but what it has meant is the opportunity to show my work alongside images of Merce Cunningham and Mary Wigman dancing and Robert Morris’ sculpture. In the ‘real’ world, bringing them together in one space would be much harder to orchestrate. It would be beautiful to see, and looking at the works online I do wonder what they’d look like in a physical space, but it has enabled that bringing together of things that possibly wouldn’t happen ordinarily. That’s what I think we should all be doing: creating these really fantastical dialogues between works of all different mediums, because that’s the unifying element of the online experience.



Dance, 2017

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