A Body of Work

‘And so from pipe to pipe, we return
Through the desert of tubes
To the raw materials, to the abstract matter.’
—Raymond Queneau, ‘The Song of Styrene’ (1958)

In the weeks before Matthew Darbyshire completed the works in his new exhibition, Passive Sensor, four sculpted figures stood or sat in his studio, looking elegant and excremental in equal measure. Fixed to the studio wall beside them was a potter’s clay extruder from which had emerged the snakes and coils the artist used to bring these bodies into being. (The coil pot is an ancient form, many thousands of years old. For these sculptures Darbyshire had to concoct a specialized synthetic clay that would hold its shape and submit to complex manipulation.) ‘Extrusion’ used to mean any act of expulsion or driving out; in the seventeenth century one might speak of the extrusion of a newborn, or the extrusion of a person exiled or banished. Nowadays we reserve the word solely to describe a certain material process: the propelling and shaping of malleable matter through a rigid aperture or die – the kind of thing done to plastics and foodstuffs, but rarely any more to bodies.

Extrusion is emphatically a mechanical but pre-digital mode of making. It gave us lead pipes in the nineteenth century, steel beams in the twentieth, and an array of plastics whose profusion no longer looks quite so wondrous. Extrusion seems both primitive and modern, but not exactly contemporary, let alone futuristic, the precision-tooled forcing of novel forms into existence having been supplanted in our imaginations by additive construction in 3D printing. With their stratified profiles and surrounding steel cages or frames – like the mobile platforms on which 3D-printed objects materialize – Darbyshire’s sculptures mimic the new technology without submitting to the inventive and replicative fantasies it incarnates. Things have not entirely changed: the extruded object and the printed artefact have something in common – beyond, that is, an obvious automatism of the process. The two kinds of product are at once fully formed, magically ushered onto the stage of their presence and visibility, and oddly unfinished, rough-hewn, requiring spit and polish. Darbyshire’s spiral-built figures might recall the seamless kitschy scrolls of a Max Escher head, or summon the sci-fi vision of a body whipped into shape from the ether – but there is something unrefined and even abject about them also.

In some of his earlier works, in which as it were the artist becomes the 3D printer, Darbyshire already exploited the additive mode of production, in which an object is decomposed by scanning (by machine or eye) and rebuilt in layers, more or less primitive, more or less slick. The sources of such works may be historical – the Venus de Milo, the Farnese Hercules – or contemporary: a radiator, for example, or a water cooler. They may be fashioned out of pearl-white polystyrene or translucent polycarbonate, with colours borrowed from the eight-colour hue and saturation scale in Photoshop. Though these works have the look of having been machined, and are in some cases derived from 3D digital models sourced online, they are all meticulously sculpted by hand. The new work goes further and asks questions regarding the very future of their medium. Is it possible that sculpture today is in a similar relationship with 3D printing as painting was with photography in the middle of the nineteenth century? What does it mean to take account of this predicament while the products of the new technology are still so crude?

Darbyshire’s new works are rather more abstracted from such explicit concerns than are previous pieces, where the symbolically super-charged sources included classical statuary and Soviet-era monumental sculpture. (Not that historical reference has vanished; the figures are based on his wife Grace, inevitably invoking the fraught history of artists and their muses.) ‘I’m symboled out’, he says, acknowledging that in recent years his work has moved on from historically tethered reflections on design, technology, taste and class to something we should probably avoid calling ‘purer’ than before, even if it seems more austere.

What of the figures themselves, their attitudes and dispositions in space? They are first of all curiously proportioned: the hands and feet are modeled after the artist’s own. These bodies have

a serenity of sorts, a sense of self-involvement that comes with their faceless grey substance. But they seem anxious too: this one pacing out her steel prison, that one touching the top of her head as if measuring her own height, reckoning her fit inside the frame. One of the two seated figures juts beyond the steel cube, undoing slightly the impression that she has been printed into existence within the confines of the metal structure. And why should these four not fret? For nearby two robotic arms, printers of a sort, are at work extruding and forming – what, exactly? Abortive versions of these apparently ideal creatures: a turd-like mass, some unfinished feet, aspects of a monstrosity that lurks below the glossed grey skin.

That material itself is among the fascinations of the figures: the surfaces of the coils are gleaming but uneven, mottled or peppered. What seems to have been manufactured all of a piece (substance and spiral) turns out to be not just additive but aggregate: not so self-identical as at first glance. Nothing is, of course: neither bodies nor things. Nor, it transpires, the space in which we find these figures, which is something like a park or garden. The ground is made of crushed stone and concrete – a road-building aggregate called Type 1 Sub-Base – to which have been added garish fragments of plastic appliances. This stuff suggests a post-apocalyptic version of the hoggin (mixed gravel and sand) you will find for instance in the Tuileries, next to the Louvre. It's a nice and unplanned coincidence that you will also find in that garden Aristide Maillol's lead sculpture of *The Three Graces* (1938), to whom Darbyshire's figures are distantly related. But the more compelling connection is this: as in a garden, the sculptures seem to pass us by, come in and out of view, experimenting with real presence.

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