

Social Substance

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This is sticky.

Sticky literally, in the plastic, gunky, gummy, slimy, tacky clay moving and made audible in video works like *A Mess of Help* (2023) (fig.1) where hands leer *Repulsion*-like to enact a geological barbering of a lumpen skull. Elsewhere knobbed clay heads, hands, and thick umbilicals are touched and stroked, fondled and prodded by the homunculi on screen. It is sticky in a figurative sense, too. The clay yokes individuals together; the clumsy grasping of giant clownish hands might be human contact muddled and complicated by the material. These gestures; this bodily contact – whether a body of flesh or a clay body – are about clay as a social and cultural connection, about a material that forms industries, economies, societies and cultures.

This is truer in Stoke than anywhere else in the UK. It is a place built on and for its clay. Students here are known to stock their tables with crockery from the waster piles (fig.2). There are stories from previous centuries that connect earth, belief, and work: that those working in the pottery industry felt their work brought them in humbling connection to the stuff that God used to make Adam.



Fig. 2. Desk, Cauldon Ceramics, Stoke-on-Trent