

Senses Working Overtime

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Fig. 1. Brick Dump, Stoke-on-Trent, 2023



Fig. 2. Pan mixer, Valentine Clays, Stoke-on-Trent, 2015

Initiated in 2009, the British Ceramics Biennial in Stoke-on-Trent is now established as the most significant festival of ceramic art in the UK. Like its near neighbour, the British Textile Biennial, which is rooted in the heritage economies of East Lancashire, the biennial's honouring of contemporary ceramics speaks of the heritage industries of the region as much as its geology. From the 14th century onwards the ready availability of clay, coal and water were prerequisites to Stoke-on-Trent becoming a world centre for ceramics and pottery. The clay-rich makeup of the locality leads to notions of placemaking. Over centuries, people and communities have converged, settled, worked and created ceramic objects in Stoke-on-Trent. There's a Potteries saying that clay runs in the veins of its population (figs. 1-2).

On visiting the *Social Substance* exhibition at AirSpace Gallery, I was struck by the ways in which Cobbing's work deploys wet clay to facilitate a convergence of art historical moments and disparate

but linked, playful, cultural and archeological references. I was immediately reminded of Phillip Guston's paintings – tragicomic depictions of figures with lumpy heads and limbs trapped within hermetic spaces. The composition of Guston's work is also reflected in the structure of Cobbing's video performance works. Several focussed on two figures framed within the

pictorial space of the video monitor. They are seen grasping for, manipulating and transforming each other with their heads and hands encased within raw clay, in turn reading as a berserk performative regeneration of René Magritte's surrealist painting *The Lovers* of 1928.

The works in *Social Substance* (2023) (pp. 10, 28-43) are shaped by Cobbing's thinking about clay in relation to the physical and phenomenological sense of the self that it has the capacity to mediate. *Obsidian Tomb* (2023) (pp. 64, 108) presents a monumentally-scaled clay hand holding an over-sized mobile phone. On the digital screen, we see zoomed-in views of hands joyously caressing a mass of raw clay. Rather than merely engaging with his work and the wider world through hand-held devices and digital screens, Cobbing asks us to consider the physical, psychological and pleasurable sensation that is embodied within clay as a tactile medium. The video screen might also be perceived as a sort of mirror reflecting the sensory experience of a specific location. The capacity of mirrors to reflect, enact and transmit site-sensitive moments of perceptual play was examined in earlier works by conceptual artists including Robert Smithson and Robert Morris. The latter's 1971 work, *Mirror Film*, shows the artist walking through a wintry Wisconsin landscape whilst holding a mirror to the viewer, soliciting a range of different positions centred on the viewer's own sensory experience.

Clay is a messy, malleable medium that enables us to connect with and learn from others. It contains the potential for the transfer of craft knowledge and learning across generations. We can speak of the fundamental democracy and accessibility of clay as a medium. It has the capacity to fuse imaginations in school classrooms as much as being presented in exhibitions or used to create ceremonial vessels and religious objects.

In addition, Cobbing's use of wet clay introduces a multi-sensorial aspect. Rather than simply looking at his sculpture in the exhibition, we might also touch and manipulate it, smell it, and listen to its squelch. The cycle of video works including