

KATIE CUDDON: CLOSE TO THE SURFACE



Katie Cuddon describes her sculptural works as 'blobs'. I imagine that all artists develop time-saving, affectionate nick names for their work which are after all the product of an intimate obsession; most of the time these names remain a private aspect of the artist's thinking and they are not intended to represent it. However, if it were not for Cuddon's use of the word 'blob', I might have had to resort to other methods for describing the sculptures; these might include twisting my arms around each other in the air or making strange sounds as I often find myself doing when I see new work that engages me. I am sure I am not alone in these performances which demonstrate the difficulty of fitting words to images and negotiating the new.

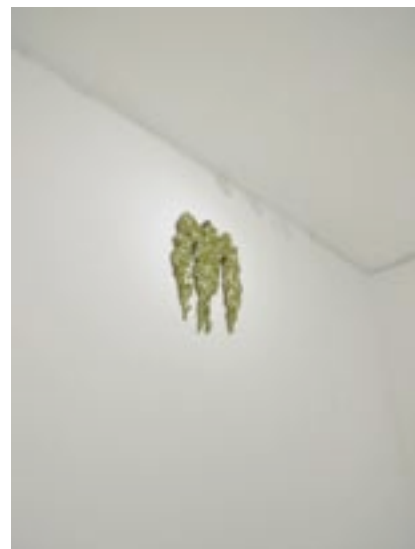
What renders Katie Cuddon's sculptures blobs is that they are enveloped by a distinctively textured clay surface. In places this is simply uneven, in others severely distorted, (like stuff squeezed between anxious fists). The terms blob or blobby are faintly comical but the effect on the sculptures is of damage or distress. However for me the term 'Blob' has lost connection to anything other than the surface of Cuddon's sculptures;

the signified has been worn away from the signifier through frequent use. I use the word 'blobby' to cover a gap, to explain something that is not readily explicable. When we write about good art we try to invoke the new but spend most of the time circling around it with our words, watching them disappear into the gap that new art makes by an act of damage against what we already think and know.

Blobby refers to the quality of a surface that is made up of intentionally heterogeneous texture sometimes even bearing the artist's handprints. It is then usually painted with a homogenising, blanket of white and it begins to appear as if all the works come from one skin. In fact looking at the work we begin to realise that the work is just this damaged white skin. The work is all surface. Blobby is what happens to clay when Cuddon goes near it, yet it seems almost to breed, incorporating and damaging everything it touches.

Looking at Katie Cuddon's work we often find that the textural eruptions distort our perception of the sculptures' form and that our eyes are drawn back to the surface. However once our eyes became accustomed to the surfaces, ambiguous bodies emerge. Cuddon's degree show in 2006 at the Royal College of Art presented a series of sculptures suggesting life-forms of human, mammalian and avian kind, bringing with them hosts of haunting likenesses. In one sculpture we might have recognised a female form with an arm raised and from this sensed the echo of a further image. If we were meant to recall here the symbolic figure of Delacroix's allegorical painting of 1830 *Liberty Leading the People*, here a blobby *Liberty* was presented as deformed and damaged.

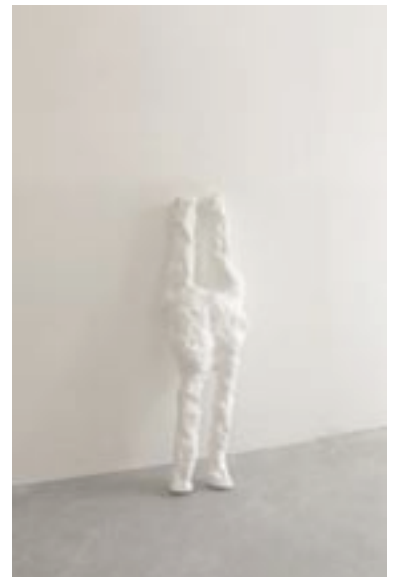
It has been said of our historical moment that we deal only in surfaces. The disparate thinkers on post modernism concur that in the properly post modern reality, reality is no longer possible and everything becomes simply representation, including history itself. A regularly invoked means for conceptualising the resulting condition is of a radical loss of depth. For Frederic Jameson, the 'breakdown in the signifying chain' that heralds this condition of pure surface is synonymous with a form of cultural schizophrenia which results in the artistic form of pastiche, or the random appropriation of styles and themes without irony or intent. Jameson extrapolates his theory from the idea that 'schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence'. Jameson's diagnosis of a schizophrenic culture involves the fragmentation of history into histories and the collapse of traditional narratives including the modern narrative of the potential for liberation and revolution. According to this theory, levels of meaning fall into each other and the symbolic content of a painting like Delacroix's, *Liberty* and the iconic image as it appears in a history of images and in history books, become blurred together in the contemporary perception of the painted surface.



I would like to suggest that if Katie Cuddon's work draws in a schizophrenic string of cultural references these are intentionally mediated by her processes, such as the production of the blobby surface. Her work incorporates historical, iconic or symbolic cultural matter in order to try to explore through her own intervention, the possibility for different ways of 'seeing it all'. From the production of the blobby surface, to the sculptures' titles and their eventual presentation, her work carefully negotiates the current terms for making and viewing. Displaying her ambiguous sculptures in small selections she suggests both the possibility for a coherent whole while at the same time resisting literal or narrative connections. The titles chosen suggest an evacuation of meaning but at the same time seem to point to this emptiness and suggest we look for meaning therein. The series of sculptures shown at her Royal College of Art degree show were titled: *Fig 12*, *Fig 65*, *Fig 186* and *Fig 195* (2006). This seemed a decisive reference to the absent place of a meta-language that would help us to read the work, evoking an index disconnected from its text.

There is another strand to Katie Cuddon's practice which explores more explicitly processes of mediation; Cuddon's digitally produced line drawings were once considered by her to be a thinking tool but have begun to present a counterpart to the sculptures. In the drawing, *The Wreck of Hope* (2006) concurrent with the making of the early blobby works, she used a generic piece of software to carry out a simple separation of all the shards of ice and ship wreckage from Caspar David Friedrich's famous shipwreck painting of 1824. The line drawing collects and numbers the fragments in an orderly inventory, biggest fragment to smallest fragment. If the romantic imagination attempted to free nature from classical man's colonising and constraining tendency, Cuddon's, *The Wreck of Hope* presents nature fully mediated by culture. This work knowingly combines references to the objectivity in classification with a radically subjective approach or, to adopt a theory buzz-word, a 'mapping' of Friedrich's work which is one commonly associated with misinterpretation and historical mystification.

Cuddon has described her reorganisation of the fragments of the *Hope* as a newly hopeful gesture. I suggest that this gesture is towards a continued investigation into the cultural present and its debts despite the threat of the schizophrenic tendency. She commits to making works that are aware of the weight that they bear. The sculptures remain standing and they require our entrance into their sculptural space, however, they acknowledge the proximity of collapse and they come out of the kiln already damaged. The works sag, buckle and are devoured by the surface but they are not entirely defeated. It is as if blobby comes from a wrestling with the will to the sculptures' own destruction or perhaps that blobby is a sort of matter that emerges at the margins of this potential breakdown. I suggest that through her processes of mediation, Cuddon implies a commitment to thinking about surface but from a point of depth. We might say that by pulling back and focusing on the idea of surface her work avoids plunging straight into it and coming apart. By continuing to stretch clay out into more and more surface, Cuddon explores the drive to continue to produce substantial works in spite of the threat by some theorists that empty, meaningless surface is all that culture is left with.



Susanna Haddon

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(Endnotes)

a Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p.27

b Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* in 'The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture' ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), p.119

(clockwise from top left)

Fig 12 & Fig 65, 2006, painted ceramic and wood, dimensions variable

Fig 195, 2006, painted ceramic, 900 x 350 x 100mm

FLAG, 2005, ceramic, plaster and gold enamel, 800mm x 600mm x 100mm