

Roost

By Hywel Livingstone

A term frequently used when writing about art (especially sculpture) is *process*. “What is your process?” people want to know. “How important is your process to your practice?”; “Is your process visible in your work?” The vague and largely meaningless nature of these oft-repeated questions hides an anxiety amongst critics, viewers and artists alike. *Process* is a term ambiguous enough to encompass what none of us truly understands: How on earth does a sculpture come to exist?

Those artists that choose to tackle the question theoretically (think Donald Judd, Robert Smithson) construct a method of writing that co-exists with the work rather than explains it, creating a genre of textual analysis all of its own. But the conceit of any writing on art is that it is impossible to explain one creative medium by means of another. The closest we as viewers can get to understanding a sculptor’s process is to seek out and isolate the pragmatic decisions made at every stage of the work, and to do so without it affecting our understanding or appreciation of the finished sculpture. This can only work effectively if the artist is equally willing to share these decisions – not merely as anecdotal information but as vital and unashamed parts of the whole.

Throughout her career, Olivia Bax has tackled this issue of process and its status within sculpture, acknowledging and making a feature of its importance. In previous works, Bax has created sculpture in a modular form, often making multiple individual components which are then assembled on site, giving the option of re-configuration depending on context. This method somewhat externalises the power of the sculpture, allowing a flexibility that is dictated by the surrounding gallery space. Whilst effective, this approach means that part of the ‘responsibility’ for the success of the sculpture is taken on by the context. By contrast, with her current exhibition at Lily Brooke gallery, Bax has given the responsibility back to the sculpture itself, bestowing on it the power to dictate what happens to the space around it rather than the other way around. *Roost* and its accompanying ceiling work *Eyrie* epitomise in a concise viewing space her confidence and affinity with her ‘process’ – she understands what it means and how to use it.

To get to grips with Bax’s process we must first acknowledge the importance of craft. Craft is sometimes a contentious word in the art world, somehow being seen as beneath the upper echelons of so called ‘Fine Art’. The romantic notion of the artist as genius is still ubiquitous, but as Richard Sennet explains in his book *The Craftsman*, good art (in any medium) comes as a result of hard work, borne from experience and experimentation:

We should be suspicious of claims for innate, untrained talent. “I could write a good novel if only I had the time” or “if only I could pull myself together” is usually a narcissist’s fantasy. Going over an action again and again, by contrast enables self-criticism.

Bax’s process has a disciplined approach supported by craft-based, practical knowledge. It begins where all good sculpture must: with drawing. These are not pre-determined designs being sent to a manufacturer as instructions, or indeed cost-effective ways of selecting which sculpture to make for a given space. These are the tentative beginnings of the work, the initial thread that will be present and indeed visible throughout

the entire process. The germ of an idea does not come from reverse engineering an imagined concept but from a response to space. Bax is drawn to surface and interior, mass density and light: she catches a spatial discrepancy in the corner of her eye, perhaps a particular junction between a scaffold and the surface it climbs, or a precarious veranda clinging to the side of a building. As well as sketches in her notepad and on paper, she records these moments with her smartphone then revisits and reworks the initial visual memory with a simple drawing app. As these layered sketches develop Bax exhausts the limits of what the two dimensional screen can provide her, and moves to steel. She only sees a minor conceptual shift when she switches from drawing with her finger on a screen to drawing with a steel bar – it is a mere progression (albeit a crucial one) in the creation of the sculpture. It is worth noting at this point that there is still no pre-conceived idea of what the sculpture will be. Bax is simply changing gear in her exploration of how drawing can serve her best. Despite the fact that she has been trained and has expertise in metal work, Bax does not wish for the rules inherent in metalworking (using heavy machinery, tools for bending, heating, lifting and so on) to come between her and her immediate haptic response to the material. She opts to use thin steel bar that can be manipulated physically, bending it with her hands or with the push of a knee. Using a welder as sparingly as her construction will allow means that there is minimum external intervention between herself and her developing three dimensional drawing. As one would expect, the result of this drawing has a human scale specific to Bax, and whilst perhaps not suggesting anything known or tangible it is beginning to exude a sense of physicality, an almost sensual tactility. She now returns to the screen, photographing and working over the image and experimenting with ‘skins’ and tones, filling in spaces with quickly rendered hatching. The almost ponderous rhythm of the steel work, with evidence of a physical yet elegant dance, changes pace when translated back to two dimensions – dashes and scribbles denoting quick decisions made on the fly. Here Bax might add a photographic image of her arm or hand to the drawing bringing it abruptly, sometimes shockingly into contextual focus. If previously we suspected the images before us were implicitly linked to a human hand, now we know.

As with all of the stages that Bax goes through, the transition from one to the next is slight, exhausting all possibility with the first before moving to the next. She clearly understands that there are certain practical rules involved in creating a sculpture (steel has many qualities but they are finite, and drawing can only replicate space to a degree) but she adheres to these rules as minimally as possible. Instead of a clean break from two dimensions to three, from page (or tablet) to studio, the two oscillate back and forth – an armature is created then photographed and redrawn, then taken back to three dimensions and so on. While the sculpture begins to take form, Bax’s clear understanding of how plaster behaves and how far to push the load-bearing structural qualities of chicken wire and mod-rock becomes evident, and once again her craft and experience comes into play. It allows her the freedom to work quickly and instinctively, making rapid decisions based immediately upon the result of the previous one, while in the background her pragmatic understanding of materials quietly supports her. The drawing stage of her process may finally be over but it is indelibly marked within the sculpture, proudly if not wilfully referring to itself throughout.

During the process of building up the sculpture with chicken wire and plaster, very little is reworked. There are no misfires or mistakes, her instincts are correct and her preparatory work rewards her with an undisturbed linear progression (an anomaly in the coherence of its construction would be immediately apparent, like a skipping record). Bax is approaching the final stage of the construction; the pulp. Once again she tips her cap to the rules, and then dives in with her own instinctive recipe. Shredded newspaper (prepared in the studio on a small second-hand shredder) is soaked in water, which has PVA glue added before the desired amount of paint. Plaster dust is then sprinkled into the mix to thicken. None of these constituent ingredients are measured or weighed, Bax knows when the pulp is ready by feeling its viscosity and its texture. This pulp is then added to the armature by hand, smoothed, pushed, and sculpted. There is a strong comparison with figurative clay modelling, but the traditional technique has been reversed; instead

of the sculptor observing the figure and interpreting it with clay or wax she is interpreting herself; her own corporeality and physical gestures writ large upon the work.

Mixing the paint into the pulp rather than simply painting the surface afterwards gives the work a solidity and weight; we instinctively recognise that this strange stone-like material is the same throughout. This in turn informs our understanding of the negative spaces within the sculpture, its hollows and apertures. They are not (despite their domestic ergonomic layout) purely a functional construction but have somehow appeared organically, grown out of an unknown substance built up in glutinous layers. The sculpture begins to take on a history and fiction of its own, and troubling questions of its genealogy begin to arise. We physically understand the shelf-like hollows and windows and our muscle-memory instinctively twitches as we pass a bin-like shape or tactile handle, but the information given falls short of a full understanding. The gaps that we are left to complete suggest unexpected results, taking us down paths that are sometimes sinister, sometimes humorous, often both. Bax is messing with us, leading us to believe that we understand the object and the space it creates before thrusting us (often literally) down a blind alley. She assures us with familiarity before abandoning us to our own devices. We are led (quite deliberately) around the sculpture where we see parts of the armature re-emerge – indeed we seek them out as reassurances that this fictitious object is just that – it has an armature, it is made of parts. But this reassurance is short lived, the armature creates frames momentarily picking out details of sculpture in a two-dimensional snapshot, before slipping back into three dimensions as we continue our journey. A theatrical or filmic quality creeps into the work, a disengagement/re-engagement with reality: Bax has become a director, frustrating us with tantalising yet incomplete views through grilles or fissures then appeasing us with a clearly framed and dictated point of view. All the while the vein-like steel follows us around breaking the surface and burrowing into the flesh of the sculpture only to re-appear elsewhere. In defiance of its original purpose the armature is competing with the pulp, fighting to be noticed.

We know the process Bax has gone through because it is there in front of us, we can see the armature, and the strafing finger marks in the pulp that has covered it. Our bodies dish up physical memories boosted by involuntary muscular responses to the teasingly ergonomic shelves, cavities and hollows. This is how humans operate, we respond to a physical space in the only way we know how – by applying what we already know and learning from it. Ultimately Bax is a democratic sculptor, she has exhausted each stage of her process allowing each the time and space to fully work its course. In doing so, she has created a sculpture whose constituent parts vie competitively with each other, yet are nevertheless essential to each others' existence. The sculpture bypasses our objective analysis and communicates directly with our bodies and memories in ways that we recognise but struggle to understand. And this is where it leaves us – stranded yet enriched.

Written for the exhibition:

Olivia Bax

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