

FOCUS

Karla Black Sculpture, vivid provocations and a mistrust of language by Jonathan Griffin

Karla Black often asks herself what she would make if there were no other people in the world. In all likelihood, she imagines, she would become obsessed with beauty, producing colourful, tactile and aesthetically indulgent creations, but the chances are that, as art, these objects wouldn't be very interesting. She is also aware that, making art in a crowded world, she risks running too far in the opposite direction – of becoming over-conscious of others, even deferential in her acknowledgment of precedents and peers, of histories, trends and expectations. Black knows that in order for her art to engage with its audience it must engage in a tussle between action and reaction, between making things for oneself and making for the benefit of others. She has even gone so far as to say that ultimately her art, perhaps all art, is actually just a series of compromises.

Qualifications come up a lot when Black talks about her work. With every tentative attempt to describe or analyse her intentions, there swiftly follows a phalanx of 'but's to double back on what she has just said. For instance, Black insists that the objects she makes are most definitely sculptures. Even when they hang on the wall like paintings, as with *Forget About Faces* (2008), or territorialize space in the manner of classic installation or scatter art (*Once Cut*, 2007), these are still sculptures, products of a specific history and debate. Admittedly, much of the time her sheets of polythene, paper or plastic covered with paint or impregnated with powder seem to be far more concerned with surface and the history of formalist painting than with weight and form – indeed, they very often flinch away from taking solid shape at all. Black even resolved at one point never to make anything that physically

stood up on its own, preferring her materials instead to hang in lazy swags from the ceiling (as in works such as *Wish List*, 2006, or *There Can Be No Arguments*, 2008) or laid out over the gallery floor. Then she quickly broke her own rule, making *Proof of the Cure* (2005), a diminutive translucent pink menhir, followed by *Now is the Time to Normalise* (2006), a dented sheet of sugar paper that stood unassisted (but only just, like a drunken ghost).

Often the surfaces bear lumps and smears of wet substances (such as toothpaste or hair gel) that will never dry and fester like open sores. The process of making is pushed to the fore, an intimate and coercive conversation that Black conducts with her materials which, if it didn't take place in guarded privacy, could be seen as performance. But Black recoils from leaving too much of herself in the work, visually or biographically, lest the viewer feels forced out of the equation between the maker and her subject.

The finished works (or at least the work as we might encounter it in a gallery, before it is destroyed, remade and destroyed again) stand as vivid provocations. Apparently thrown together or half crushed (the crumpled form of *Walk Away from Gilded Rooms*, 2008, looks ready to be tossed into a skip), they are nevertheless exquisitely poised and untouchably fragile. Like a frosty lawn, or a giant soap bubble, the impulse to spoil them is somehow essential to our understanding of their vulnerable beauty.

This fragility is itself politically provocative, particularly in the way Black sets triggers for viewers to blunder into clumsy debates about gender roles both in art and in the wider world. Feminine cosmetic products such as lip gloss, conditioner, spray tan or concealer sit alongside more conventional art materials. Nevertheless, her use of such substances is ambiguous; while

they often appear as messy interruptions on otherwise flat or dry grounds, their use is not obviously grotesque or parodic of their traditional functions. Indeed, Black talks of prettification or concealment as a 'civilizing procedure', a self-editing process that helps to maintain distance and to establish boundaries. However, it is the inevitable ineffectuality of this screening process that interests Black – what slips through the laddered gauze.

This is, in a sense, a result of the artist's mistrust of language, or at least her interest in that which eludes language's civilizing control. She is greatly influenced by the writing of Melanie Klein, a psychoanalyst whose post-Freudian theories drew on her observation of very young children and babies' relationship to objects (in which category Klein included people) that was intuitive, pre-linguistic and in a constant state of development. When Black uses language in her titles, she does so with the express aim of revealing its instability. Titles such as *Pleasers Don't Decide* (2007) or *Differences Are Definite* (2005) were chosen for their contentiousness, for their brittle assertiveness and their sketchy logic. Black admits that they were designed to fail – collapsing onto the mute (but differently expressive) sculptures.

Ultimately it is the objects themselves that are desirous of our attention. Our interpretation bounces off external considerations like a pinball – discourses, resemblances, associations and histories. It comes to rest with the sculpture in front of us, the strange, lush, intimate and remote presence that asks us to be alone with it, and to forget for a moment the world that surrounds us. As if that were possible.

Opposite:
There Can Be No Arguments
2008
Polythene, chalk dust, thread
Installation view

Below left:
Now is the Time to Normalise
2006
Cardboard, paper, paint,
concealer stick, hemp hand
cream
190x105x60 cm

Below middle:
Punctuation is pretty popular:
nobody wants to admit to much
(detail)
2008
Chalk dust, towels, sellotape,
cellophane, cling film, paint,
washing-up liquid, antibacterial
hand gel, body moisturizing
creams
Dimensions variable

Below right: (Foreground)
Forget About Faces
2008
Cling film, body moisturizing
creams, cellophane, petroleum
jelly, paint, paper, sellotape,
cardboard
Dimensions variable
(Background)
There Can Be No Arguments
2008
Polythene, chalk dust, thread
Installation view

