Conversations

Jesse Darling and Nisha Matthew

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A transcription from an in conversation between artist Jesse Darling and Residencies Curator Nisha Matthew in March 2022.

Nisha Matthew: We are really excited to be welcoming Jesse Darling here this evening. Jesse is an artist and poet based in Berlin who works across installation, film, text, sound and performance. They have been the fourth recipient of the Freeland Lomax Ceramics Fellowship which Jesse had originally started at the end of 2019, but was unfortunately put on hold due to the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many people here might know Jesse's work from their *Ballad of Saint Jerome* exhibition at Tate Britain in 2018, their inclusion in the 58th Venice Biennial *May You Live in Interesting Times*, as well as their more recent solo exhibitions which include *Gravity Road* at Kunsteverein Freiburg, Freiburg (2020) and *Crevé* at La Friche Belle de Mai, Marseille (2019). Tonight's talk is ahead of Jesse's solo exhibition *Enclosures* at Camden Art Centre, which will be opening in May and just as they are about to open their survey exhibition *No Medals No Ribbons* at Modern Art Oxford. Alongside all of this Jesse will also be launching a selection of written works with Book Works this year.

So I thought maybe a nice place to start would be asking you about your show in Oxford and also your forthcoming book.

Jesse Darling: I've got to start by saying that I just got off the Eurostar from Amsterdam, and I was teaching all day yesterday, with another day of teaching tomorrow and it's only the middle of the week. But I'll try to be a little bit eloquent. I have to say that the show feels a little like a wedding, or maybe a funeral, in the sense that it's the first chance I've had to properly reframe what I think I'm doing in my terms. I'm really looking forward to the install. I told the team at Modern Art Oxford that I need to just be in the space, no CAD drawings or sketch ups ahead of time, like I'll know what to do when I'm in there.

A lot of the works are things that people might not have seen because they're revisits of old things I made in 2014, 2013 even. I don't think I was a very good artist back then. I was really just learning and starting out, and I'd like to think I'm better now. So I wanted to return to some of those works with a keener formal sense, and also a sense of how I might push them a bit, and place them in conversation with other works. There's also a whole crowd of weird human sized sculptures mainly in steel of different kinds that I made here and there for group shows or fairs over the years. I thought I would never see them again and actually I'm so excited to see some of those guys.

In the pandemic, I made a rollercoaster. I mean, it's not functional, but it's a real rollercoaster to scale. That was a whole thing; we did it ourselves, me, Joe, Zach and Viktor in the metal workshop in Berlin. I was only just able to work again because I was very sick for a very long time and couldn't move my right arm. It was exhibited once in Freiburg in a building that used to be a Nazi swimming pool and very much feels like it, like you walk in through these big Nazi columns and there's a balcony all around where you can look down on what's happening. I wanted to respond to the space on a low budget so I thought to work with steel. Back to basics. It's relatively cheap, and you can make a great big drawing with steel in space. But it's been in storage ever since. Very few people ever saw it, because of coronavirus. So, that's gonna be there too, and I'm super excited to see it in that space.

Then this Books Work thing; I said that it would be a non-ograph, like a catalogue without any pictures, only texts. I gave my editors everything I'd written in the last 10 years and said please help me do something with this but let's not have this corny thing where we go Semiotext(e), Sternberg, "serious artist's collected interviews". I didn't want to come off like I think I'm a public intellectual. But the first edit felt like a ghost-written celebrity autobiography. Like, the nobody: Me meme, you know, like let me just tell you all about what I think about stuff without any context. Anyway, now there's a second edit, which combines some image descriptions, dream fragments, the odd essay, some interviews. A little bit shorn of context still, but I wanted it not to have any chronological sense, like it could have been written now or 10 years ago, and this is what I also wanted to do with the Oxford show.

I suppose I believe that an artist is always doing the same thing, like we're always singing the same song. And I wanted to have this opportunity to put the chorus in harmony, and for these notes to ring out strong enough that people can – finally? — understand what I've been trying to do here this whole time.

NM: When we invited you to take on the Freelands Lomax Ceramics Fellowship, we had seen many of your sculptural and written works, some of which are going to form part of the Modern Art Oxford show, but we had also seen works you had made using clay in its unfired form. This was where our conversations started, so I wondered if you could share with us how you were wanting to approach the Fellowship.

JD: So, I don't know much about ceramics, even after the Fellowship. Precision isn't really my strong point and ceramics is a whole thing, you know, it's something to master. There's a lot of science in it. Then there's another history of ceramics which is fired vessels and this whole story, and I just didn't really have anything to bring to it because I am more interested in the petrochemical macabre, or what I think of as the petrochemical unconscious. I often work with steel and plastic because at some point I started to think of these instruments as the materials of modernity, meaning that these are the materials that made me and my family, for better or worse, you know. And they have long, violent histories, not least of which is the fact that plastic and steel are both derivatives of the oil industry.

But clay is something different. It doesn't have the same history of extraction. But I didn't want to be sentimental about clay or parochial or do something folky with it. As a material it doesn't speak to me in that way. But I did start thinking about the history of porcelain which is also a history of trades and colonisation in modernity, and of course it's another violent history. And I think that's part of my job as an artist: the prerogative to look at, and try to recount these stories in some way, to explore the unconscious of history through the prism of my own

unconscious, maybe. But maybe I should call it the unconscious of *my* history, since most of this stuff is a matter of public record.

With this next body of work, which I can't tell you much about yet, I am thinking about extraction and death, how just about every culture and society has found very robust practices and rituals around the proper disposal or deployment of the dead: sea burials, air burials, funeral pyres – whatever works, you know? There are also stories of mediaeval European and British villages where people were dug up and reburied because of a fear that those individuals might come back as revenants. There's a really old and extremely widespread practice throughout the world of keeping the dead in the ground, or otherwise properly disposed of. So it seems like a kind of bad luck magic that petrochemical capitalism has dug up what ought to have stayed in the ground. We've dug up our ancestors, essentially, in the fossil substrate. And of course nothing good can come of that.

And then it fits that from this fossil substrate comes steel, comes plastic, which is the technology of immortality and will outlive us all and clog up the whole world while doing so. It's like the zombie apocalypse, you know, brought out of the ground to walk around among us – and inside us – in the microplastics that are now swarming around everyone's bloodstream. In capitalism there can be no death because it's not built into the equation. Which makes it a death cult, really, and yet, that's what we're living through. So this was how I started thinking about what's in the ground, which was happening at the same time as this virus killing millions of people everywhere, and yet, we're all back to work, business as usual, money to be made. With this pandemic the death cult has really reached its apex. This is what I've been thinking about. And somewhere in all of that is the story of clay and the ground itself and why we can't leave it alone.

NM: Well that is a horrifying thought but I guess this idea of our ancestors, but also the architectural 'bodies' that form the ground beneath us, marking our epoch, is something we have been speaking about throughout your Fellowship. How do you be in relation or mourn the rupture inflicted on these bodies or materials that are dug up from the ground that have these silent and sometimes violent histories attached to them and are, kind of dragged out of 'rest' through industrialisation.

JD: I mean, I guess that's the question. I don't think there is any space for mourning. I had this correspondence with a really old friend of mine, Sebastian De Line, who's an academic and artist of Haudenosaunee descent. At that time he was kind of reconnecting with his own ancestral practices. I wrote to him with the question of how we might think about making kin with petrochemical by-products, in part because he'd written an essay, a great essay called *Clay and Common Ground*, where he touches on a lot of this stuff. And he said, "Well, you know, the thing is that those petrochemical by-products are *also* our ancestors," and then we started talking about grief and mourning. His people have in every proper sense witnessed or experienced the end of their world, and yet, the linear, eschatological, fire and brimstone, narrative of 'apocalypse' is not part of their theology, even though their 'apocalypse' is ongoing. And yet somehow there's a cycle. We started to talk about how, in a wider European context, one might go about addressing the grief of what has been wrought through exhuming our ancestors and becoming alienated from a sense of place through ongoing enclosure of the land. He was talking about the idea of reconnecting to a European Indigeneity, but I was like, "Whoa, wait a minute," like in the UK context the indigeneity discourse led in part to Brexit and all of this anti-immigration sentiment and race hate. The idea of a 'true' Brit as a white Brit, union jackass, Celtic-Nordic-Caucasian made up indigeneity from some Lord of the Rings fascist cosplay. Which is all totally ahistorical of course because this country was settled and colonised and recolonized so many times before there was ever anything like England. And maybe that is also something I'm trying to think about when I'm thinking about the ground in general, you know?

NM: I think a lot of your previous works have really looked at these failing systems and crumbling structures and in many ways, on appearance, they feel like these support structures that are there within these really familiar objects, distorted or kind of barely held together, just about 'surviving'. I guess a hopeful resilience and I wondered if you could talk about that.

JD: Oh it's both. On the one hand, I'm like anyone else in that I'm an object falling apart and held together in various ways, they're all self-portraits as much as every artwork is a self-portrait. But it's not really about me. It gives me a lot of comfort somehow, although it scares me shitless, to know that nothing's too big to fail and that the whole thing's coming down.We're in the middle of a collapse, and the fact that the likes of me, you, whoever, might not come out of the right side of that collapse, well — maybe we'll also have to take the loss, take the L, you know. And that's another kind of grief.

Power's shifting and the empire is falling as of course it was going to one of these days. Everything dies. I've had to deal with some conservators in the last few years and I just say look, if the work can't be fixed after a certain point, then you need to let it die. It should have a mortality, a lifespan. I'm not working in marble because I don't want it to be around 2,000 years after I'm gone. I mean, who knows what will be around 2,000 years after I'm gone, do you know what I mean? I don't have those ambitions for huge posterity. I find it very important to make a small space against this complete bullshit lie that something could or should last forever, you know? Sorry to my gallerists that I said that out loud now (laughs).

NM: (laughs) These materials you're using like steel and concrete and plastics as much as we talk about rotting and destroying, they have an everlasting life maybe just in a new shape or form, a ruin of its original. Which is, I guess what you are addressing.

JD: Yeah.

Nisha Matthew: Which takes us to the show here at Camden Art Centre show, and the idea of ruin - the objects and bodies that remain. I wonder if you could speak about how you see this and want to work with them in that form.

JD: I mean, a ruin is just like chicken bones or tree stumps or whatever. It's no different from a thing just out there in the world. It could also be the ruin of an artwork. Without somebody around to read into it, project onto it, put their gesture or gloss on it, a work of art is just a bunch of stuff. Or else it's a deeply precious and sacred artefact which speaks of past thoughts and past times via some kind of auratic transmission. Or it's both. The human-centric lens gives a kind of narrative to it all, but left to its own devices it's no different from any other surplus.

I woke from a dream recently and wrote – 'ruins are to cities what a corpse is to the crowd.' I don't know what it means actually but maybe it's the one thing that the collective doesn't like to think about, but at the same time, it's the continuous trajectory, the inevitable of everything. Cities will go into dereliction unless they're maintained. I hadn't been to London for two years and when I came recently, I was shocked to see the dereliction of stations, trains, playgrounds, schools. These places have basically been allowed to drift into ruination because they're civic spaces and this government doesn't care about that. Living in Berlin I got accustomed to the German relationship to civic and social space, which has its own history and problematics – and I guess I hadn't imagined how quickly things can fall into ruin. A reminder of how people, things, buildings, spaces, or the idea of society can also very quickly fall apart when there isn't some maintenance put in, which is what we might in the curatorial-industrial complex call 'care' or whatever.

Ruin is like death, in that it's the natural state, or it's the natural progression, which has to be continually worked against. The idea of ruin is a complicated one.

NM: When thinking about what you're working on for the exhibition at Camden, I wondered if you could talk about the idea of kinship and community and how that is manifesting in your more recent works but also how you try to, subvert those notions of it as well.

JD: Yeah. I mean like 'care', 'kinship' has become one of those curatorial buzzwords, though…

NM: (laughs) I take it back.

JD: No, I said it first! It's not to say that we're not all complicit in this thing. There's the kinship with the living and dead that I've been talking about, but I was also specifically thinking about the family; specifically, the nuclear family. How the family is figured as the threshold of the border, and the family as the primary unit of private property, and this accretion comes to function in the wider dereliction of what you could think of as community. What I think about that should be clear, but I also find it interesting to think about in the work without making a huge didactic statement.

I'm thinking about some kind of necessary counterpart to these very unreconstructed and celebratory narratives around motherhood and family, if only to ask, what do these narratives mean? I have a child and I take a position as a parent, having done lots of different kinds of caregiving throughout my life, as I'm sure many people here have: being a parent is one form of caregiving, and having a pet is another, there are sick parents, friends in crisis, alcoholic ex-lovers, neighbours with disabilities. There are lots of ways of looking after and caring for people. I suppose my agenda is that parenthood, as in this particular model of child-rearing as primitive accumulation, shouldn't be reified above the other kinds, either in discourse or in the apparatus of recognition by the state. You need every kind, and that's what I mean by community.

I'm interested in how children, motherhood and 'the family' are deployed to create a certain rhetoric, which basically becomes a form of neoliberal privatisation. I'm not with it, I have to say. As always, I have very strong feelings about this stuff, but if it's in the work, I'm not trying to judge it as such. I think it's more interesting for the viewer to make up their minds about what I might think about it, or more importantly, what they might think about it. It's more important to me that the phenomenon gets some air, which might contain a narrative as well as a counter narrative, than to say my piece.

NM: I think that's what's really lovely about the works of yours that I've seen, it's not making a judgement, but it shouts out, well maybe that's too strong but it asks the viewer to take notice and think through these structures and I guess that's something that comes out in your work as well as the way you speak and write about things. It gently shines a lens on something and asks the viewer or reader to question these narratives. Which is also what we are really looking forward to seeing develop in the works at Camden.

I'm conscious of time and I wanted to open to questions from the audience.

Audience 1: Jesse, I was wondering if a lot of your practice incorporates materials that have been recycled?

JD: I find or source a lot of secondhand materials mainly because they have a stronger story, they carry more affect. Then I reuse my own materials a lot, so they kind of show up here and there throughout many bodies of work. In fact, what I have around in the studio does often end up steering the work. I have also specifically worked with waste materials, in the past – like I've been in the waste disposal and made assemblages specifically from what gets thrown away, because I was interested in that. They were ephemeral projects that didn't always end up on the CV, but in short, yes, sometimes.

Audience 2: It was good to learn about your relations with the materials, which is very new to me. I was wondering what your relationship is with paper, ink and charcoal and if you have a similarly intense relationship with those materials?

JD: That's a good question. But no, not

yet, because I don't know anything about paper, which I realised recently when I did some drawings for a show. I borrowed some architectural paper from my friend, Beth Collar, with whom I was making this show, and I learned that with shiny old paper, I could use colored pencils to make something like a gradient, like you might in Photoshop. So then I went and bought more paper and I was like, now I'm going to draw a lot of gradients. But I found that the paper's surface didn't allow for that, because I'd bought the wrong kind of paper and I had to learn what this particular paper was good for, which was a whole other adventure. So it's a developing relationship. Once upon a time I was a graffiti punk and the first drawings that I made as an adult were with these drip markers for tagging, which are really bright, vivid colours. I loved them and used them for years, and then after a while I wanted to know about other kinds of lines, other kinds of tools. Charcoal I don't know much about, but it occurs to me now that charcoal also comes from the ground. I did just learn how to do drypoint etching for the edition at Oxford, and it was so good that I decided to maybe make some for Camden, because it's metal and it's grease and it's ink and it has its own death. You can't endlessly replicate an etching because it will eat itself away. I love this.

NM: Well, maybe, Jesse, on that note on the violence of drypoint etching we should end tonight's conversation.

JD: (laughs)

NM: It has been a pleasure speaking with you and thank you for sharing with us some of what you have been thinking about over, well 10 years, but definitely in the span of your fellowship, with us.

JD: Thanks.