

File Note 153

Jack O'Brien

Essay by
Dominic Johnson
Camden Art Centre
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Dominic Johnson

Fixations

At the heart of Jack O'Brien's exhibition *The Reward* is a gargantuan pair of spiral staircases, wrapped in stockinette (tubular sheaths of webbing used in upholstery) and fixed at intuitive intervals with bulging chrome spheres. The spiral staircases have been industrially fabricated, and are fit for purpose, but their utilitarian function has been denied: they are rotated horizontally and suspended from cords. Also titled *The Reward*, they are imposing, dominant, monstrously large objects: together they weigh more than half a tonne. Their newly pointed uselessness is theatricalised by the artist blocking the steps with the stockinette, which subdues (without obscuring) its shape and function in creamy translucence. The staircases appear generic to some extent, though O'Brien describes their mutual design as particular to industrial warehouses in South London. The materials and objects used in his sculptures often have this doubled quality: general and particular, mundane and exotic, elegant and pedestrian. I recognise some but others remain obscure. Certain elements seem mysterious until information or perception renders them bathetically familiar (the chrome spheres are Christmas tree baubles attached with cable ties).

Connections are forged inside his exhibitions through supplementary objects that appear to tease or mirror the use of favoured materials or objects elsewhere. In *The Reward*, the gridded

plate-glass windows of the gallery space have been covered in colourless sheets of frosted plastic (attached with a sucker, stuck with a nipple-like steel nut). A central strip is left bare, allowing a horizontal shaft of light to enter from outside. In an adjoining gallery, O'Brien has constructed sculptures that complement the main installation, though which also introduce a departure. The sculptures are constructed from found materials, including cutlery, trumpets, steel bollards and industrial plastic panels (an echo of the frosted panels used to cover the windows). This is a recursive structure. Parts repeat the whole in miniature such that the dynamic is self-reflexive; it's unclear which is the source and which is the citation.

The stockinette, a recurring material in O'Brien's recent sculptures, has an unnerving effect in *The Reward*, as it does in *Just* (2022), where ornamental cake-stands ripple in an extensive series inside the same webbed fabric. In both works, the stockinette is held taught across the sculpture's 'body' and then gathers and pools at the ends. There is something hazily erotic about this relation between the tightly sheathed phallic object and its spent, drooping excess. O'Brien's assemblages are frequently wrapped or bound. In *Volent* (2023), an antique carriage is wrapped in cellophane. A chrome sphere appears to rise from its binding, as though the wrapping has been slit or has been breached by the violence of an eruption as it bulges from below. Similarly, in *Fuga* (2023), a broken cello, chrome balls and cardboard are wrapped in tight layers of cellophane, such that the submissive contents of the bundled form are generally unidentifiable. The title, '*Fuga*' (from the Portuguese for avoidance, flight, or leakage) invokes formal collapse as well as the *fugue state*, a dissociative psychological condition of self-loss. Two bound spheres emerge from the central column and, from their tops, stacked spheres are freed from the cellophane. The whole resembles a body that has been mummified with fetishistic gaps (mummification names an erotic practice of submission and domination in which a supplicant is bound in tape leaving openings for access to erotically charged parts: nipples, genitals, eyes, mouth

—or, matter-of-factly, holes for breathing). That said, while the whole suggests an erotics of restraint, there is nothing visibly organic or ‘bodily’ about the ensemble (despite a ‘head’ of spray-painted furniture slats wrapped in a rug, and a ‘neck’ constructed from a fence post spike). It invites erotic investment but it’s also rigid, intimidating, cold, unfuckable. The object remains disconcertingly remote.

O’Brien uses a promiscuous range of materials, some of which are found (abandoned or broken) or else readily available for commercial and industrial use. They are bought from hardware shops and antiques suppliers or scavenged from roadsides and given new love or hope or sensuality in the studio or the gallery. O’Brien uses materials designed for construction and industrial production, like asphalt, mortar, concrete, rubber, silicone, epoxy, wax and plastic; building components like pipe, machinery belts, cable ties, PVC tape, shrink wrap and polycarbonate film; metals including chrome, steel and aluminium (street lamps, forks and spoons, nuts and bolts, wire mesh, builders’ bar, ventilation ducts); glass in the form of bottles, jars, lightbulbs and fishbowls; wood (banisters, slats, a horse-drawn carriage); fabric like seatbelts, net, muslin, denim, socks, shirts, rugs; leather shoes and belts; things that bind or tie like rope, shock cord, horsehair braid and ribbon; organic materials such as wine, honey, dead flowers and sawdust. He also has a romantic predilection for integrating musical instruments: the cello, double bass, and trumpet.

O’Brien tends to choose materials that are cheap, convenient to use, easy to acquire, reusable, and recognisable or accessible to the viewer. Their apparent authenticity and democratic legibility set them apart from more specialised processes and materials of artistic production, which can be arcane or elite, and which O’Brien generally avoids. That is, it is difficult to intuit from the encounter with a bronze sculpture how the process of lost wax casting works, but looking at O’Brien’s *There Must More* (2023) it’s self-evident how a chrome bauble can be melted and bonded with a plume-like strip of bent builders’ bar. He tells me his chosen materials and processes have a constitutive

‘honesty’ that he finds attractive. It’s part of the magic through which these sculptures draw us in. It also has something to do with what makes me want to hold them.

There is an uneasiness in the encounter with the object or material separated from its designated place or usage. The problem of the horizontal staircases, for example, is a formal one: they are no longer usable but are also out of place (each does not connect platforms or storeys and cannot, while sheathed, be returned to this purpose). The displacement of utilitarian function is generally attributable to art after Kant’s founding definition of the aesthetic. In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), he writes that a work of art should have ‘a purposiveness without a purpose’.¹ The art object, then, requires a driving imperative behind its construction, but any worldly function or applicability is supposedly counter to the (formalist) understanding of art. Yet O’Brien invokes more complicated layers of ‘improper’ meaning or effect in his combinations of objects and materials, typically by way of suggestive forms, embodied processes, and erotic relations between materials: binding, squeezing, penetrating, stuffing, bulging, suspending.

A sense of distortion (as skewing) or disruption (as unruliness) is always apparent in O’Brien’s sculptures. Distortion and disruption may both describe situations of the redistribution of objects or artefacts (things no longer in their proper shape or place) but also suggest problems that are political, ethical or moral in character, including through the insinuation of sexual anomaly or impropriety. O’Brien tells me:

Exploring the charged intersections between materials has become a fixation of mine. I’m trying to create a state where everything pulses with tension and possibility. It’s like gay cruising: there’s something intensely erotic in the heightened stakes, in that electrifying sense of the unknown and what might unfold.

David Getsy agrees that the strategic misuse of objects by artists can be potentially 'queer', noting how 'for those viewers searching for sites of resistance to the enforcement of the normal and the supposedly "natural",' the encounter with manipulated or displaced objects invites 'mutual recognition' and a solicitousness that lures us into sensual and inventive intimacies with art.² Perhaps it is this quality that sets O'Brien apart from similar artists like Isa Genzken or Helen Marten, whose intuitive sculptural assemblages may be too chaotic, soulless or expensive-looking to lay claim as disruptive, erotic agents.

Critics often name the erotic or queer aspect of O'Brien's sculptures, despite the distinct absence of explicit figurations. Sam Moore describes his work as 'not-quite-figures with an erotic energy.'³ Kabir Jhala finds in them 'the keen mixture of excitement and danger that fuels an act of clandestine public sex.'⁴ O'Brien thinks of his sculptures in dialogue with the spaces of the city that he has inhabited and from which elements appear to derive: those of domesticity and work, and of recreation, like bars, clubs, gay saunas, and cruising grounds. The latter are sites for emotional investment: we co-create or inherit them; they are retooled to our uses; we leave bodily traces there; and they are endangered by violence, policing, and surveillance as well as by gentrification and urban development. Yet O'Brien's sculptures stop short of directly representing 'real life' scenarios, like work, sleep, or sex, or larger phenomena like criminalisation or gentrification. The works clearly have an erotic charge but not because of direct resemblance: rather, it is invoked through the odd encounters between materials, or because their borders become indistinct through strenuous manual techniques like stuffing, binding, or shredding. O'Brien's sculptures rely on an understanding of queerness as a critical gesture where the ideal of an essential (sexual) identity is revealed as a benevolent myth, boundaries appear to fray and blend, and existing structures (spaces, institutions, and architectures, for example) can be retooled for dissident use.

In their obliqueness, O'Brien's sculptures participate in a contemporary turn towards queer abstraction, where queer art no longer naturalises a primary iconographic impulse. Getsy notes that the desire to find queerness in abstraction counters the widespread tendency to quarantine the reception of sex and eroticism in bluntly figurative representation. 'Too often,' he writes, 'the study of sexuality in art is dismissed if it departs from the iconographic depiction of sexual acts or bodies that are deemed to be erotically appealing. It's one of the ways that those suspicious of or uncomfortable with queer theory [...] attempt to domesticate its critique - by claiming that anything other than the obvious is [...] hopeful projective fantasy.'⁵

In the British context, O'Brien and other queer artists like Prem Sahib, Gray Wielebinski, Jesse Darling, and Florence Peake have generally departed from iconographic depiction towards queer abstraction or formalism. For example, Sahib's *Do You Care? We Do* (2017) consists of twelve lockers salvaged from Chariots, a gay sauna sacrificed to the gentrification of Shoreditch; and *Work That Body* (2013) in which surfaces painted with resin resemble condensation cleared from a mirror with a wet hand. Many such works are suggestive primarily to those who inhabit spaces designed or claimed for queer use, whether for ecstatic play, community activism, or illicit sexual encounters. William Simmons describes queer formalism as the 'informed and blithe state of free association that springs forth from the simultaneous love and scepticism that non-normative bodies cultivate in order to survive.'⁶

The refusal to manifest erotic experience directly can sometimes feel coy, but it also arguably allows representation in an oblique or impermanent fashion, to be consumed in novel or illicit (subcultural) ways, and signalling a queer turn to the age-old problem of form (as opposed, for example, to the problem of content). For Jennifer Doyle, promiscuous attention to queer form complicates the claim to queerness as "'only" about identity (as if what that meant were somehow simple or obvious),' and emboldens 'queer attention to

certain kinds of labour and attention, ways of working with things—that physicality, that kind of maintenance [or] sculptural housework.’ This privileges ‘the erotic [...] as a mode of knowing (or even being known by) the object.’⁷ How, in the (fleeting, impersonal, perhaps confusing) encounter with O’Brien’s sculptures and installations, do we know them in erotic terms—and, more strangely still, how do they come to know us? I fixate upon the object. Is the object fixated on me?

There is a non-specific kinkiness to O’Brien’s sculptures. It’s difficult to put your finger on it, but the eroticism is there, luring us silently, doing its own promiscuous work. It’s as if the objects themselves somehow invite our solicitude, projecting their own unfathomable needs and wants.

Dominic Johnson is a writer and curator and the author of four books. He is a professor in the School of the Arts at Queen Mary University of London. His curated exhibition *Hamad Butt: Apprehensions* opens at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin in 2024 and tours to Whitechapel Gallery, London in 2025.

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| <p>1 Immanuel Kant, <i>Critique of Judgement</i>, trans. James Creed Meredith, ed. N. Walker (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15, 57.</p> <p>2 Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, ‘Queer Formalisms’, <i>Art Journal</i> 72, no.4 (Winter 2013), https://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=4468</p> <p>3 Sam Moore, ‘Jack O’Brien Cruises for Ghosts’, <i>Frieze</i> 224 (September 2021), 136.</p> <p>4 Kabir Jhala, ‘Jack O’Brien: Waiting for the Sun to Kill Me’, <i>The Art Newspaper</i> (1 October 2021), https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/10/01/emerging-art-london-exhibitions-josephine-baker-jack-obrien-vo-curations</p> | <p>5 Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, ‘Queer Formalisms’. <i>Art Journal</i> 72, no.4 (Winter 2013), https://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=4468</p> <p>6 William J. Simmons, <i>Queer Formalism: The Return</i> (Berlin: Floating Opera Press, 2021), p. 43.</p> |
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Reading List

- Nick Axel, Beatriz Colomina, Nikolaus Hirsch, Anton Vidokle, and Mark Wigley, (eds.), *Superhumanity: Design of the Self* (Brooklyn: eflux Architecture, 2018)
- Sam Cottingham, *People Person* (London: Joan Publishing, 2022)
- José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009)
- Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020)
- Joel Sanders, (ed.), *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997)
- Jeppe Ugelvig and Camila Palomino, (eds.), *Viscose Journal: Retail*, no. 5 (Berlin: Bierke Verlag, 2023)

Viewing List

- Lutz Bacher, *AYE!*, Raven Row, London (2023)
- Isa Genzken, *75/75*, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (2023)
- Todd Haynes, *Poison*, (United States, 1991), film
- Charles Ludlam, *The AIDS Plays Project: ‘Camille’*, London Performance studios, (2023)

Listening List

- Chida Hida, *Boiler Room: Tokyo DJ Set*, (Boiler Room, 2014)
- Laure M. Hiendl, *String Quartet No. 1* (Tubular-Mondo) (2018)
- Haruomi Hosono, *Laugh-Gas*, Track 7 on *Omni Sight Seeing* (Epic, 1989)
- Towa Tei, Kylie Minogue, and Haruomi Hosono, *GBI (German Bold Italic)*, Track 7 on *Sound Museum* (East West, 1997)

Biography

Jack O'Brien (b.1993) lives and works in London and is represented by Ginny on Frederick (London) and Matthew Brown Gallery (Los Angeles). Recent solo and duo exhibitions include: *Nectar*, Matthew Brown Gallery, Los Angeles, US (2024); *Love Triangle*, Aro, Mexico City, MX (2024); *The Theatre and Its Double*, Between Bridges, Berlin, DE (2023); *The Answer*, Sans Titre Invites, Paris, FR (2023); *To More Time*, Lockup International, London, UK (2022); *The Influence of Emotions On Associated Reactions, with Henryk Morel (1937-68)*, Polamagnetczne Gallery, Warsaw, PL (2022) and *Waiting For The Sun To Kill Me*, Ginny on Frederick, London, UK (2021). Recent group exhibitions include: *Support Structures*, Gathering, London, UK (2023); *Memory of Rib*, N/A Gallery, Seoul, KR (2022); *Chômage Technique*, Lovaas Projects, Munich, DE (2022); *Something is Burning*, Kunsthalle Bratislava, SK (2022); *An Insular Rococo*, Hollybush Gardens, London, UK (2022) and *Strange Messengers*, Peres Projects, Berlin, DE (2018).

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'I sometimes think that there is
nothing but time, that what you
see and what you feel is what
time looks like at that moment'

Paul Thek

Camden Art Centre
Arkwright Road
London NW3

