

Maud Cotter

Maud Cotter's work has at its core the physical, material and conceptual experience of existing. A day-to-day existence that is informed by a series of judgments and questions that are part of a continuous process of realigning ourselves in relation to others and our surroundings. Maud Cotter distills this process in her work, probes at it, questions it, revealing to us things that we constantly overlook in the everyday. She has expressed a wish for her work to be "a way of reawakening our perceptual grip and understanding of the world we live in". Encountering a Maud Cotter installation is a disquietingly familiar experience, as her work is not about creating new points of reference but about the extraordinary overlooked in the ordinary. She wrote about the new work in also: "within these pieces lies a remembrance of the ordinary, spaces that cushion the everyday and intervene between our flesh and other things."

Maud Cotter's sculptures give form to this distillation of the experience of living. She uses a limited range of mundane man-made materials, namely cardboard, plaster and resin, which she pushes to reveal the full possibilities of their nature. The resulting forms and surfaces define the works but also seem to suggest associations beyond their declared materiality. The resin covering the three cardboard columns of the evidence of things creates a constantly shifting dynamic between density, fragility and transparency while the delicate cardboard 'skeleton' inside *into* is given weight and density by its lumpen skin of Lafarge plaster.

These different 'effects' are not accidental and come out of a long period of studio-based research where chance and accident run parallel to control. Cotter fully understands the nature of the materials with which she works. Each piece is underscored by a series of experiments testing their capabilities and then is fabricated through a set of deliberate procedures to achieve the desired result. But there is a point in this fabrication when the objects themselves find their own form - the way they sit on the studio floor as they are setting, the temperature as the materials set, all contribute to their final character. Cotter harnesses these moments of transition and so creates a tension that prevents the objects from slipping into the mannered and purely formal.

This 'hands-on' materials based focus in Cotter's practice is informed by a strong conceptual framework. Consequently her studio is as much a thinking space as a physical space for making, as Cotter herself has said; "strictly speaking my studio is in my head, I often think that all I need are my ear-protectors to help me concentrate." Studio time is very important to Cotter as a place for thought, experimentation and making. However, her interests and motivations as an artist are not developed in this isolated and removed environment; they are very grounded in the real and the connected.

In a text describing the work in *also*, Cotter describes the 'pockets' of air left by our bodies as we move through our environment and which unrecognised, leave potent evidence of our existence:

"...the air we shift on opening a door defers to our passing. That held by a coat seeps out a trail of absence. These vapours have grown meek through lack of recognition."

Just by being, we become part of our surroundings and this tenet informs all of Cotter's recent work. She is not concerned with a connection between the individual and an ideal elemental landscape but the reality of the urban world, our complicated relationships to equally complicated beings and our position within complex and encompassing structures and systems. She does not present a picture of the isolated, autonomous being disconnected from this environment, her view is one of a physical and conceptual integration between the body and man-made structures.

It is possible to find references to the scale and proportion of the body in the forms of the works, but they are not about the figure in a descriptive sense. Instead the forms refer to a "molecular body in a state of connection with everything". Architecture is a key interest for Cotter, but architecture defined in the broadest sense as the enclosure of spaces; spaces that are permeable and of which we are part, materially and conceptually. As the artist has written: "There's a simple and a very complex truth in acknowledging our material connection, how we are part of everything around us...I think that this is a fact of existence, not an approach but a condition," an idea seen in works such as *in a short time* where there is a fusion of suggested architectural forms with an implied human presence.

This relationship between ourselves and our surroundings is not fixed and is subject to a shifting balance between cause and effect. Similarly there is an openness in Cotter's work that defies a single fixed reading. The three forms of the evidence of things at once enclose and expel the air surrounding them. Cotter describes this as a process of inhalation and exhalation that is part of the constant push and pull of existence - our taking in and dispelling of air changes the balance of things around us and these permeable objects extend beyond their form into all the spaces of the gallery. More discreetly, the gently broken surface of *the same amount* ruptures the apparent self-containment of its closed-off forms and allows the surrounding air to seep in.

The relationships between the objects in the gallery is crucial, they are individual but are at all times affected by those around them. Many of the works are made up of multiple elements and the relationship between them establishes a numerical dynamic that reflects our position within groups, particularly filial relationships. They raise questions about how we function within groups, at which point we are separate and at which point our individuality is absorbed by the unit. There is a tension in the pairing of the two forms in *originally there were two of us*, they are perceived as a unit but still maintain a distinct separation from each other while the three columns of *the evidence of things* gently assert their individuality within the cohesive group. The viewer to the exhibition is a crucial part of this dynamic. Cotter describes the viewer as a 'participator,' as entering the exhibition is not a neutral process. Our presence adds a new dimension to the complex relationships between the different objects in the space and it is impossible to walk through the gallery without a heightened sense of our own physicality. Cotter's position as an artist is not about grand sculptural gestures. While we can appreciate the sculptures for their formal qualities, this is a means to an end and not the reason for the work. At all times there is a retreat from a position of drama and definiteness to one of uncertainty, tension and fragility. This allows space for the viewer to engage with the strangely ambiguous forms that contain rather than describe our experience of living.

Sarah Glennie Summer 2002