

Peter Buggenhout

Peter Buggenhout's art is one of extremes. It has a head for heights and also a stomach for the depths, showing at the same time how little distance there is between these zones. He has made some of the most powerful and uncompromising sculptures to be found in recent years, asking us to take them for what they are – visceral clusters of blood, guts, rubbish, debris and other heterogenous matter, all bound together within intact free-standing and wall-bound works. He sees each of these works as having their own characterful and individual personalities and wants them to hit us between the eyes, frustrating expected viewing habits and unsettling familiar ways of thinking about art and what it might have to offer.

Buggenhout's confrontational sculptures are analogical accounts of how he sees things, tantamount to his sensibility and world vision. They persistently pack a punch, attracting and repulsing in equal measure. When asked to say more about this and the broader offer of his work, he states that his work signals 'larger epistemological change, pointing to the failure of language, the end of belief and our ultimate inability to understand the world.' It is an outlook that is both philosophical and artistic, steeped in the base materialism of Georges Bataille, as much as in an aesthetics of formlessness, as understood from *l'art informel* of the post-war years onwards. We might think of the work of John Chamberlain, Robert Rauschenberg, Joseph Beuys, César, Arman and the French *nouveaux réalistes* here, as well as associations with Arte Povera and the bricolage tendencies that followed.

Buggenhout's work shares concerns with such art and artists, but it also stands alone in a different contemporary context whilst holding hands with an outlook that connects further back, before the 1950s and 1960s, to the World War One nihilism of Dada and its radical collage and montages that brought the splintered raw material of the world into the work. Although such associations are there to be found in Buggenhout's work, his practice is essentially independent – transgressive, disorientating and untrammelled by artistic legacies – a solitary swimmer bobbing about within the much larger cultural currents of a post-Romantic age.

The four works on display in this new exhibition each offer different ways into the urgencies of this sensibility. Buggenhout works in series within bodies of works and here we find *I am the Tablet #7* (2022), *On Hold #21* (2022), *Mont Ventoux #20* (2016) and *Mont Ventoux #43* (2022). *On Hold #21* is nearly three metres tall and comprises plaster, steel, inflatable rubberized textile, skin and plastic. It towers above us, confronting us with its beautiful obstinacy and brutal material obduracy, while also asking us to pay attention to its carefully detailed idiosyncrasies. The same is the case with *I am the Tablet #7*, a large wall-bound work, that crushes and collapses material hierarchies by bringing together large slabs of chipped and broken marble, pushing onto their surfaces and into their crevices all kinds of other materials, such as epoxy glue, acrylic, foil, polystyrene, tape, foam, old dish cloths and polyethylene terephthalate (PET as used in plastic drinks bottles), which give transparency as well as a shiny coating, reflecting light in ways that obscure as much as reveal the materials underneath. The title, *I am the Tablet*, also contains secrets, coming from a song by Lou Reed called 'The View' on the album *Lulu* that he produced with Metallica in 2011.

These complicated crushed and crashed works pride themselves on their illegibility. The tablets carry no inscriptions, no commandments. Try and read *I am the Tablet #7* as a still

life, a *nature morte*, and you soon find that this work is unapologetically void of any didacticism, iconography or consolatory narrative content. No illusions, nor delusions are on offer: no vanitas, nor *memento mori*. Try and read this work in terms of the fragment and things again unravel, since viewers are provided with no missing parts to complete in their minds' eyes, no phantom limbs to comfort them. For Buggenhout, there is no bigger wholeness within which to relate these disparate materials – and no coordinating world order surrounding them to harmonize their imperfections and asymmetries - and make it all good. These material objects are what they are – there are no mysteries to be discovered, no epiphanies to be had - and have each been assembled slowly over time through a fascinating mixture of happenstance, bloody-mindedness and delicate compositional choreography.

His works contain creation and destruction, chance and order, extensions and compressions, explosions and implosions, dissections and bandages, pressure points and passages of release. They are simultaneously cavalier and controlled. They also have a muscularity and a brutal, expulsive quality that is finely balanced with delicacy, precariousness even, and this is a very compelling characteristic of the work. That said, they don't offer themselves up to be discovered, the making processes traced, unpicked and unpacked. Rather they remind us that we know nothing, while showing us fear in a handful of dust. Although hung on the wall like a painting, *I am the Tablet #7* has a surprising complexity in depth. Sections collide like disconnected tectonic plates, as spots and passages of raw material are wedged, like secret messages, between layers, out of immediate sight. View *I am the Tablet #7* in profile from the side and a whole backstory is opened up, with further objects lodged into each other. His works defy photography - perhaps are deliberately against it - distrustful of photogenicity and of the photographic image's unequalled ability to sanitize, simplify and seal things within its laminated layers and pixelated constellations.

Image making plays an important role here. Buggenhout started life as a painter and after this turned to sculpture, since it offered a way of escaping stylization and the mannerist gestures he was beginning to discern in his painting. It also promised the independence, object autonomy and real-world visual experience he was after. Alongside this, sculpture – or 'concrete and autonomous de-symbolised material objects' as he prefers to call them – offered a way of moving from the individual to the general, from personal expression to statement of universal fact. You can still, nevertheless, see the eye of a painter in his work, residing in the attention to surface detail and in the ways that the palette of colours and textures have been considered carefully together at every turn. Such a sensibility is carried over well into the sculpture, the artist's skills transferred. He works with found material as he might pigment. The surface is crucial, as he acknowledges, 'the skin of the work, that initial point of encounter, is the contact surface.'

Working very early on as a sculptor with the intestines of animals (his stepfather was a butcher) allowed Buggenhout to learn that abject materials were where he felt most at home and where questions of form, content and personal world vision coincided most fittingly for him. From blood and guts, he graduated to dust and debris, collapsing artistic material hierarchies right, left and centre – and from top to bottom. As he often likes to say: 'my sculptures would be seen as garbage and taken away by the dustmen if they were placed beside a bin.' One of the important ideas of these materials and his treatment of them is *indifference*. Stuff doesn't give us a second thought – it doesn't love us - and there is

no point in projecting our fantasies of longing onto its skins and structures. Another component of this is the work's deadening silence, its violent silence you might say. The acts of collision and coalition in front of us, of trauma and collateral damage, are noiseless - all completely mute. They might intimate sound visually through the imaginary snap and crackle of twisted and broken fragments, but their actual soundlessness hangs very heavy around them, a bit like a guilt. It also accentuates the loneliness of their autonomous sculptural life and we might think of other solitary objects, such as space rocks and debris orbiting the planet, silently crashing into each other above in the vacuum of space, as we go about our lives below, oblivious to their collision courses.

So welcome to the world of Peter Buggenhout's sculpture – and to the sculpture of Peter Buggenhout's world. For the artist 'the whole world is in the work.' Many of his works come complete with circular and elliptical plinths. These provide realms for his sculptures to orbit within. We might think of those scholars' rocks – Chinese *gongsbi* – hollowed out by water movement into fantastical shapes that offer up images of rocky worlds in miniature. Such geological objects – natural ready-mades – were much admired by collectors, who placed them on bespoke pedestals on their desks and in their gardens. Interestingly, Buggenhout has very recently remarked upon such objects in relation to his own works, commenting:

'I think of dream stones or scholar stones with rare and incomprehensible shapes that are put on specially shaped pedestals. Stones that make you dream away, lift you out of the material level even though you are pretty much aware that they are just stones. Up to a certain level, I'm doing pretty much the same. No 'makers' hand is visible - it's just material, but it makes you dream, reflect without the 'promise' that there is more than just materiality.'

It is a powerful comment and a reminder once again that although these serious and ruminative sculptures might open into a less hopeful world, they can also offer portals into a more realistic one, and into a new kind of sublime.

Dr Jon Wood