

Olivia Bax: Home Range
20.01 – 05.03.2022

Olivia Bax (b. 1988) is an exciting new talent in the field of contemporary sculpture. Grounded in sculpture's histories and engaged in its futures, she spent her early twenties working as a studio assistant to Anthony Caro and after this working on the sculptor Charles Hewlings' archive. This unique sculpture background is also reflected in the recognition she has received in recent years, awarded the Kenneth Armitage Young Sculptor Prize in 2016 and presented with the Mark Tanner Sculpture Award in 2019.

Home Range, which showcases a cluster of Bax's recent works, highlights many of the tendencies for which her sculpture is now becoming known. Bax is a sculptor who brings things together, creating ensembles of found and made objects, held together by metal armatures, chicken wire, cardboard and paper pulp. Her handling of these materials runs with and departs from established sculptural processes, simultaneously constructing, welding and modelling, and using the metal armature both as an inner supporting structure and as an active component of the final sculpture itself, pushing through and out of the modelled paper pulp.

Her multipartite, and yet all-of-a piece ensembles read as sculptural contraptions, elaborate devices that might bring to mind the cartoons of William Heath Robinson, as much as the Dadaist biological machines of Marcel Duchamp. She has a preference for conduit forms, such as pipes, funnels, tubes, chutes and hoppers, that suggest ideas of passage and transferral while carrying directional energies with them. She also uses forms of containment such as pockets, socks, sacks, sachets, cup and vessel that suggest temporary and tentative ways of holding and enclosing things. Hooks, handles, holding devices and other tool and prop-like objects are also deployed, enabling her to link one thing to another, suggesting relationship and connection, while highlighting difference through juxtaposition.

Across this repertoire of expectant forms, we find Bax's predilection for making ambivalent ensembles that suggest use and non-use values simultaneously. She invites us to consider such sculptural puzzles in the round from different perspectives, inviting us to try and make sense of the pulp fictions before us. Objects and structures are skilfully folded into each other; tension points bandaged together with desire lines that cut across perpendicular forms. Her compositions have a well-poised awkwardness, and the asymmetries and balanced imbalances are subtly choreographed. Space is bent and stretched: pickpocketed, wrapped into corners, made to slide down ravines, trapped in gullies and sheltered in caves that, through their mischievously rocky impersonations, might have come straight off a Flintstones set.

Hooked forms are also used to capture her viewers' imaginations and invite them into the sculpture. *How do you do* (2019) is an excellent example of this. The title of the work doesn't need a question mark because the sculpture itself is a question. It's a leading one too: one walking stick-like handle secures the sculpture to the wall, helping it keep its balance, while another handle protrudes at hand height, directly inviting viewers to shake it and become acquainted. It is nice to meet Bax's sculpture and one of the interesting things about her work is how she succeeds in making serious sculpture in a playful way, much like those sculptor-painters, such as Alberto Giacometti and William Turnbull, whose work has informed her own over the years.

As well as construct and model, Bax also paints, but rather than being applied at the end, her paint is mixed into the pulp (and other materials, such as PVA glue and plaster), from the very start. This means that she works with colour both as a painter and as a sculptor might, modelling colour as one might clay. Most of her sculptures to date have been monochrome, but more recent works begin to see her combine several colours within a single work. *Home Range* (2021) conjoins greens and yellows and *Scatterboard* (2021) mashes together vibrant reds and blues. Bax's bold palette and the lively, tactile surfaces she creates are very important elements in her work, and this is no more powerfully shown than in *Off White* (2020) with its dazzling hotch-potch of reds, blues, yellows, greens and white. Bax reads quasi-sonic potential in this work, seeing it as 'quite a loud piece', as well as one which suggests a hybrid combination of 'strange seat, storage container and light fixture.'

Talk of environments is appropriate and each the works on display in this exhibition point to an ongoing concern in Bax's sculpture with creating environments that are fantastical while at the same time reminding us of existing ones. Her sculptural set-pieces read as nesting structures, curious habitats and modes of habitation, personal spatial-material orbits coordinated by techniques of the body, such as sitting, reaching, leaning, kicking, holding, resting and pulling. The exhibition's title, *Home Range*, highlights such concerns, evoking both animal territories and the domestic context of what is to hand. When the work is hung on the wall, such invitations are offered up in direct head-to-head ways. *Portal* (2020) is one of her largest and most compelling of her wall-bound sculptures. It hangs down like some impossible or non-functioning light fixture or some strange optical contraption. It is a sculpture for seeing things through and for seeing through things: a threshold object suspended in air, equipped with one circular hole looking back at us as we look into it.

Dr. Jon Wood