

Something Other than What Is There
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Andrea Taylor's artworks are operations of chance. The base materials for her sculptures are rescued from the cardboard recycling dumpster outside her studio. From there, Taylor begins the process of forcing the stiff stuff into the structure it wants to be. Have you ever tried to force a box into any other shape? As a medium, packing cardboard is neither eager nor easy to push or to ply into any form other than what it is. As a result, the artist must break it, press it, rip it, pull it, and aggressively curl it into a resting position. The results range: the sculptures can be conch-like; twisted and cavernous; bulbous and mushroomy; or spindly, straight, and delicate. It is difficult not to treat Taylor's objects as a sea of creatures, each with individual wants and needs—if not to anthropomorphize them and attempt to gather with them as a squad. However still or static these structures may be, they remain kinetic, vibrant, and teeming with movement.

The casual effects of risk or luck are similarly apparent in Taylor's video work *Three Figures (Liquid Stardust)* (2022), where stop-motion plasticene figures move to animated charcoal and pastel mark-making. The work sequences swift transitions between three-dimensional shapes and flatness—between vivid colour and tonal graphite. As with the exhibited sculpture series, I observe an exciting and joyful, almost silly, character to the artist's movable forms. Again, I'm cautious not to push humanizing qualities or identities onto their surfaces, and yet it's hard not to call them "guys" or "buddies," grouping them in some way, because there appears such a friendship between the figures. It is a fun challenge to resist this urge.

Listen closely to the film: the soft sounds of mark-making produce the soundtrack. Invisible hands scribble and erase, sounds swish and scratch, rattle, crack, and rub, wrap and unwrap. The noise is light, matching the sprightly, unplanned motions of the drawn charcoal, juxtaposing the weightiness of the clay mounds as they move and blend, somewhere between speed and slowness.

I am struck by the relationship between Taylor and her structures across the many mediums in which she works. As friendly as her formations appear with each other, so too does a warm fellow feeling seem to exist between the artist and her materials. In as much as each piece contains its own charisma or nature, it arrives to its singularity through her touch. I imagine Taylor in her studio punching and wrestling with the cardboard boxes, producing the sculptural consequence of this difficult dance. The claymation actors, too, show her physical imprint, the intervention of her thumbs and palms, and the depressive force of her hands and arms. Likewise, the immediacy of Taylor's mark-making is inextricable from the hands that draw them. The works are a fragile container of Taylor's movements; in turn, they come to share some of her liveliness. She is present in every twist and turn in her work. She is the lining of every fold.

The exhibition that houses these artworks, *We can only hint at this with words*, addresses the limits of language in expressing the ongoingness of meaning. Taylor's co-conspirators in this

group show, M.E. Sparks and Russna Kaur, are each motivated to paint beyond the limits of history. For Kaur, this history is deeply personal and familial. Sparks offers a deft feminist response to the canon of art history. Taylor's work looks to the body's responsiveness toward art, how the intensities of our affective reactions offer unique extraverbal data. Each artist's practice produces an expansive art, one beyond the frame.

Like Taylor, my own investigations as an art historian centre on the encounter between the viewer and the work of art. My method is to theorize the act of viewing art as a busy site for the exchange of indirect information—a place of mixing for me and the artwork. Taylor's work is an exciting object of study because she inserts so much of herself into her practice. Her artworks make any potential combinations that much richer—triadic, as her objects become a conduit for the viewer to understand the artist's own movement.

Many levels of combination function in Taylor's work: the *interplay* between artist and medium; the *interaction* between viewer and artwork; and, at a longer reach, the *interchange* between the viewer and the artist vis-à-vis the art object. From creation to viewing, a process of making and unmaking folds the artist into her objects, to be later unfolded through the viewer's observation of them. At every point of contact, her artworks gather potentials and capacities and raise the question: How can things become something other than what they are?

Taylor's process challenges the fatefulness attached to objects, now free of their exhaustive, literal meanings and predetermined uses because she has enabled them to create new relations with her and with the viewers that engage them. The artist's studio is well populated by her gracious and responsive formations. They gather over every surface and line the walls and floors with their changeable presences.

To come to know these objects, I really had to be with them, to travel them. They require the viewer to circulate their entire structure, to get below them and look through them, to tour every tunnel. The reward for this effort is found in and expressed through Taylor's use of high-pigment colours—intense oranges, reds, neons, pinks—set with glossy resin and broken up with swaths of hand-painted black and white stripes. Visually, they are a feast.

I hear the ring of feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's compelling description of life: "Life is matter extended into the virtual; matter is life compressed into dormancy."¹ Art offers us a unique mode to think such a proposition through, and particularly Taylor's art, because her works retain the qualities of her movement long after she is done forming them. In dance, bodies are trained to imagine a kind of movement that extends well past their physical parameters. How can you, for example, extend your arm in such a way that the movement keeps going beyond the limits of your fingers? As I mentioned earlier, the sculptures seem to store Taylor's kinetic practice. So, too, do the figures and the marks in her video work. The liveliness and playful energy of these moving images offer an almost endless opportunity for the artist's actions to just keep going.

Nonhuman matter becomes something that teems with lively potential, like a pressed flower that remains just as alive when it dries. According to a philosophy of affect, all bodies function in a system of relation. An object's liveliness is expressed in the encounter with other material bodies. It is found in the impulse of these bodies toward action, in the release of possible becomings. Taylor's art has the propensity to express something other than what is there. These works are not simply the product of mediums, materials, and techniques; rather, they are what happens when these things and processes come into active contact, and how they come to develop new use-value and new expression through their blending.

In our conversations, Taylor mentioned that her efforts aim to obfuscate her materials. I read this intention less as an act of elision and more as a physical process designed to crack open her resources and extract what can be renewed. The subtitle of Taylor's exhibited video work, *Liquid Stardust*, references some specific thinking that informs her practice. To say that we are all composed of stardust sounds like a cosmic exaggeration, and yet it is a scientific fact that many of the elements of the periodic table, including those that compose the human body, are the product of stars that have gone supernova. As stars die and lose mass, the elements that this process generates are swept out into space. New stars are formed from these elements in an ongoing cycle of burnout, cleansing, and reformation. This system of breakdown and renewal sets a pace for Taylor. We can see it happening, in particular, in her animated drawings: composition, erasure, new marks; again.

I want to be careful not to convey too grand an optimism in my reading of Taylor's art. Rather, what I wish to highlight is the cycle of building and demolishing that is so present in the work—relaying that nugget of potential carried forth in all processes of destruction. The philosopher Jane Bennett offers us a useful term here: "vibrant matter," by which she describes the vitality that runs across all materiality.² Thinking about the mutual exchange between human and nonhuman forces carries such a glowing tinge, but we must remember that even ugly matter is a participant in this potent intersection. Which is to say: even garbage and compost quietly ferment and bubble away as they decompose into togetherness. Yet, as Taylor salvages her discards—cardboard, scrap metal, wool, fibreglass, even her own movement—I think she intervenes like a kind of trash collector or recycler, gathering discarded fragments and reforming them, creating a new shape that remembers its old one.

¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 32.

² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

(Note added by the artist) Written on the occasion of the exhibition, We can only hint at this with words. with artists Russna Kaur, M.E. Sparks and Andrea Taylor, curated by Kate Henderson, at the Gordon Smith Gallery of Canadian Art in North Vancouver, BC, April 23 – June 25, 2022.