

Olivia Bax

Handrailing

14 September 2024 – 10 November 2024



presented by the **New Art Centre** in collaboration with **Sid Motion Gallery**

The work of Olivia Bax shows sculptural qualities in a medium of boundless possibilities. It is the sheer sculpturalness of her work that makes it so seductive. It's now almost a decade since she received her MA at the Slade School of Fine Art. Since then, she has completed an impressive body of work rooted in fabrication, construction and assemblage. Bax's use of materials is instinctive and through a series of gestural actions things begin to take shape. Nothing is pre-rehearsed or preplanned. Instead, from a point of departure, Bax moves through a series of steps where questions and new possibilities are explored, answered, fulfilled, or discarded.

Handrailing, is a show of recent work suggesting new and exciting propositions. The term 'handrailing' is used in hiking. It is a navigational technique to aid or guide. It helps keep you on track. This resonates with Bax in her process of making and taking a work from one stage to the next. Making use of a range of materials from welded structures to waste or found things. Coloured paper pulp is made from mixing old newspapers and discarded household paint. Never hermetic, her work is alive and mobile to its environment. Bax has said how she is interested in making works that suggest an action or a feeling. As such, her form of sculpture is not so much taken off the plinth, rather it is the work and plinth combined as one indivisible whole. Ideas of form, structure, colour, weight and mass coalesce as if attracted by a gravitational pull. A skeletal metal armature, and body made in steel, chicken wire, cardboard and paper pulp form the character. Steel acts as a supporting structure but is both contained and punctures through to the exterior of the modelled paper pulp.

At least in part, one can see the root of this in the plaster-soaked armatures of Alberto Giacometti, Germaine Richier, Elisabeth Frink, William Turnbull and Eduardo Paolozzi. These artists were interested in how one can suggest motion or mobility in sculpture and the seriousness of play, actual or imagined. And yet in my mind, the humour and the philosophical paradoxes in her work recall a line of enquiry closer to Franz West. The question of mobility and posture is suggested by Bax in the use of wheels or casters. '*How a sculpture could be activated or mobilized yet still could not be touched was electrifying for me*', stated Bax. Inspired by transport dollies and the ease of moving a sculpture around in the studio, when she was a student Bax recalls seeing work by Rebecca Warren and stated how playfully the subject of movement was depicted.

In new work such as *Funhole*, 2024, the structure rests on three tiny casters. Bax credits Phyllida Barlow whose work has inspired how she merges display and sculpture so the two are one. In fact, how she completely destabilises the form of sculpture itself.

Applying coloured paper pulp makes Bax's works distinctive, and the unifying and expressive effect is absolute. The texture and modulated coloured skin help give solidity to the form, utilising the one attribute, namely colour, consistently underrated or considered secondary in the medium. The method of application presupposes accident and chance and when its dry there are often surprising results.

The moulding of forms in this way creates a distinctive coloured texture. One that is not simply a surface membrane but coloured to its inner core. Bax is interested in how she can use colour tones to emphasise touch or pressure. That colour tones can suggest bruising or determine areas of weight, pressure or fragility. *Great Catch*, 2024, started with the idea of linear balls to make space. There are two welded linear balls hand bent and welded one on top of each other. Then the form was partly covered with the idea of a great balancing ball that seems about to topple. This theatrical assemblage explores internal and external space. A spiralling rail hosts an array of carabiner-like stakes that festoon the structure. Bax may well be deceiving us with camouflage and subterfuge, pointing us towards the most dominant rather than the most significant form. Certain familiar devices in her work have become recurring motifs. Handles or holding devices for example, emphasising the hand in the work but also playfully teasing or inviting the viewer into the work. The carabiner-like appendages provoking touch or participation as if they should be clipped on and off, from one section to the next, itself a proposition of Handrailing.

The earlier work shown here, *Monkey Cups*, 2018, led to this way of working and opening up ideas. In this vessel sculpture, the three constituent parts are not bolted together, rather they are dependent on each other in order to stand up. A form that offers balance and counterbalance. *Meander Scar*, 2021, was previously a site-specific work that was cut up and again reformatted. Bax sometimes uses existing forms (funnels, drains, wheels, hooks) as a way to insert 'familiar' items into 'invented forms'. Funnels and vessels intrigue Bax, with their connotation of water-born processes such as filtering, distillation and evaporation. Perhaps a signal to the use of water when applying the coloured pulp. Her sculptures have been described as biological machines, pointing out Bax's preference for conduit forms, such as pipes and tubes.

These hybrid creatures are animated in their suggestion of passage and flow and transferral of directional energies from one state to another. *Topping Off*, 2024, is a table piece taking its title from the severe pruning method of reducing the crown of a tree by cutting off the top branches. Bax routinely cuts up older works and repurposes them in new works as is the case here. A section cut with a grinder revealing the paper pulp is no surface veneer but rather the colour runs right through the section. It's solid as in David Hockney's paper pulp pictures.

Cairn, 2022, is a tall, monumental piece consisting of four parts that stack, with found packaging in the armatures, recalling a building or monument. This is reinforced by the material; the steel bar, performing like rebar, suggesting further construction, expansion and growth of form.

In *Handrailing*, the work proposes a desire to reach out and touch or be touched. By moving the armature from the inside to the outside, Bax is in fact looking at the outside in. Reframing the sculpture, with the steel drawings of its support, or as Bax has said, 'I try and reverse my own process, making the work the wrong way round.'

Calvin Winner, August 2024

COVER IMAGE: *Olivia Bax, Funhole*, 2024. Steel, chicken wire, cardboard, epoxy clay, plaster, paper, PVA, household paint, plywood, drain, wheels, 193 x 84 x 93 cm, 75 x 33 x 36 ⅜ in.

NewArtCentre.
Roche Court Sculpture Park

Roche Court
East Winterslow
Salisbury, Wiltshire
SP5 1BG

+44 (0) 1980 862244
nac@sculpture.uk.com
www.sculpture.uk.com
@newartcentre