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Issue 02 – Susie Olczak

SOS / Sculptors on Sculpture is a series of weekly condensed interviews with young contemporary sculptors.

Susie Olczak is a multidisciplinary artist with a focus on sculpture. Her work asks the viewer to look again at the world. It is about the perception of geometry, pattern, and light while moving through transitory spaces.

SOS: This is the second interview in a series that really came into fruition through the Covid19 lockdown and finding new ways of supporting each other. How have you adapted to the lockdown? Are you able to continue making work at this time?

SO: I am still in the process of adapting to the lockdown. I am working from home and I'm alone. I've travelled alone before and spent a bit of time on my own but I'm pretty sociable and so this is the longest I've ever had myself for company. Normally after just a day on my own in the studio I'm ready to be out and about and meeting people. It's going surprisingly fast though and I'm keeping pretty busy. I am currently without access to the studio as I feel like it's a risk to go there as it's a public building and so I'd rather keep at home and find ways to make work here until I'm able to go and be sure that it's not causing an extra strain on the health service.

I've been working a lot from the kitchen table and I set up a printmaking studio on the kitchen floor as it's lino so it's ideal. I can't make much sculpture right now but I've been making card maquettes and playing around with packaging that I've got in the house or from deliveries to make three dimensional work.



'Chain Reaction', 2019, Mixed Media, 70 x 30 x 25cm

I've also been working on a project called Conscious Isolation with an artist friend Samuel Zealey. To help out with the current situation where a lot of art students have lost access to studios and facilities, we're organising an online series of artist talks, panel discussions, lectures and exhibitions. We are hosting these artist talks through Zoom and on our facebook page 'Fine Art Lecture Series.'

SOS: What interests me in your work is this idea of transitory space, of moments and passages one encounters that are in between A and B, neither here nor there. How do you reflect these moments in your sculpture?

SO: I've always found movement and moving through urban and natural spaces interesting, particularly in urban spaces where it's so built up. I like the way that light flickers as you walk past railings and how it gives the illusion that the metal is warped or moving. I've used neon a lot in my work and coded it so that it goes on one light at a time to give similar effects to things flickering, moving or spinning.

I grew up in the countryside in Lincolnshire, where the land is very flat and the horizon line is always very striking. The skies seem bigger than in other parts of the country. I have been drawn to the way that light has an effect on atmosphere and mood from a very early age. This was emphasised by spending time living and studying at art school in Kyoto, Japan in my early 20's. Japanese culture really pays homage to the seasons and their design maximises on experiences of light and the elements. I'm particularly drawn to places where these experiences are heightened, like the deserts in Nevada, the mountains, the sea or the experience of being alone in Iceland. So a lot of my work responds to this, using light or materials that control light or work with light.

I've always felt this strange mixture of constant disorientation and excitement within urban space but also this yearning to be within nature. I often feel a bit bombarded by all the experiences and visuals but I think it's important to celebrate that rather than seeing it as a bad thing. I therefore often piece together fragments of these experiences, through material choices using

I take on journeys I go on both physically and within digital space. I also often make structures that are in between falling over or being propped up. I think this reflects a feeling of both precocity and the instability of current times.



'Chain Reaction', 2019, Mixed Media, 184 x 40 x 30cm

SOS: What's more exciting to you the idea or the execution? Do you make maquettes or digital drawings for larger works or are you more intuitive and responsive?

SO: That's a difficult question. I think both and I definitely believe it's really important to be ambitious with ideas. I really enjoy coming up with hypothetical projects that may never be realised. I am excited by the process of making work and the way it comes together when it's presented to the public more than anything else. I really enjoy making the works come alive within the space they are shown in.

Drawing has always been more of a way of thinking for me rather than producing works of art. However, I think it's most exciting to be working with the materials physically and intuitively.

SOS: If you had to select one artwork which marked a significant shift of direction or concept in your practice, which would it be?

SO: I'm not sure if I can select one artwork but I can definitely pinpoint a period of time. It was this time last year, when I was in my second and final year of my masters in Sculpture at the Royal College. I'd been working hard and I felt I was making progress however, a tutor told me that she felt my work hadn't changed since I'd arrived and that I needed to surprise myself. Another tutor and also a visiting lecturer told me I needed to bring in more of the unexpected in my work and another said that I needed to try to be more playful and suggested that I used up all my materials in my space. It was pretty daunting to make such big changes a few months before my degree show. I felt that as so many people had said the same or similar things but from different angles it would have been silly not to



'Growing the Outside Inside', 2020, Glazed ceramic, digital print, packaging, acrylic and mono-print, 170 x 40 x 40 cm

listen and that after all was why I was doing my MA. I didn't want to leave being the same artist.

So I started to spend a bit less time in the workshops or when I was in them I was learning a specific process like casting or using glass cold working. I spent a lot more time playing in the studio and this was so beneficial as my work became more fun to make, more alive, and I now have a practice that is much more balanced between studio work and workshop processes. Before I was so dependent on workshops, whereas now I have the option to do both. Also it started off this process of continuing to reuse materials and to have a cyclical process of making and then remaking.

SOS: You've just completed a two month residency at Standpoint Gallery. A gallery that has long championed the sculptural practices of young artists. How did you find it?

SO: It was such a great experience. I was working alongside two really great sculptors, Veronica Neukirch and Catriona Robertson which was inspiring and it was really great to have a constant dialogue in the studio again. I think this is what is the most shocking part of leaving art school. You go from being surrounded by people constantly and suddenly you are alone in the studio again and don't have the opportunities for feedback and collaboration so readily. I also really enjoyed spending time in the resident studios. Nicola Tassie was really inspirational and helped us to create works in ceramics. A material I used a lot when I was younger but haven't used for a long time. It was really freeing and allowed me to reignite my love for the material.



'Chain Reaction', 2019, Perspex, steel and paint, 48 x 44 x 25cm



Studio experiments during Standpoint residency using digital images, tape and packaging materials.

Guest Question: Adapted from Matthew Barney 'The Conversation Series' in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2011. 'One last question. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a lovely book decades ago, which is advice to a young poet. What is your advice to a young artist?' (say an artist first year into a BA in Fine Art for example)

SO: My advice would be to keep making work and to make the work you want to make, rather than what you think might receive more Instagram likes or more sales.

Also, to keep making the work that feels true to you and try not to worry too much when you get rejections, or if people don't respond to the work in the way you were hoping. Learn from these times but keep going. If you stay true to what you want to do and make art work for you, rejections and misconceptions don't really matter and in the long run it makes the work stronger, so it's win win.

Interviewer: Josh Wright