

Nick Hornby: Zygotes and Confessions – Alexander Massouras

Mostyn, Llandudno, 14 November to 18 April 2021

In 2008, the artist Nick Hornby hosted an event with the writer Nick Hornby. The apparent humour of turning the Hornby pair into human homonyms, however, concealed deeper connections with the artist's sculptural practice. Bringing together two Nick Hornbys, who in turn often discussed other Nick Hornbys, was a gesture which pluralised and destabilised ideas of authorship and subjectivity. The fixity of those notions is something persistently challenged by Hornby's sculptures, which often accentuate distance from the artist's hand through an emphasis on the quotation of other artists' work and which also manifest a clear relationship with digital design. Hornby unifies these ideas in his work by applying an immaculate finish so that his sculptures can appear almost machine-made. Mediation, for instance through processes such as mould-making and complicated fabrication, is not alien to sculpture but that distance tends to be offset by the conspicuously direct traces of marks in sculpture – the strike of the chisel or residual finger-marks left in shaped wax or clay – and the physical presence of sculpture itself.

The exhibition 'Zygotes and Confessions' at Mostyn announces these themes of Hornby's practice in its title. Here, the 'zygote' – a bundle of cells resulting from fertilisation – signals Hornby's preoccupation with hybridity, while 'confessions' is concerned with how subjectivity is perceived and the notion of artists' presences in their work. Such ideas play out through the exhibition over three broad categories of sculpture: portrait busts, mantelpiece dogs and abstract modernist forms borrowed from artists like Hans Arp. Each group wears a skin of glossy photographic imagery. Over Hornby's busts are images by photographer and drag queen Louie Banks, over the dogs appears BDSM imagery and on the abstract forms are found images of often startlingly cropped – of swimwear. This reference to sex is Hornby's concession to subjectivity, revealing the personal desires of the artist, playfully relocated onto a pompous bust, a twee mantelpiece ornament or a canonic piece of abstraction.

The sculptures all share photographic surfaces, an unfamiliar incursion of photography onto three-dimensional forms, and adopt its reflective sheen, too. A dance between flatness and three-dimensions has previously informed Hornby's method of pairing recognisable sculptures so that they only become 'recognisable' from one viewing aspect, making them behave as two-dimensional images as well as three-dimensional forms. Whereas cubists captured the shifting encounter of the eye with the material world, Hornby inverts the unity of the sculptural form so that it 'breaks' when it is experienced as an image.

The introduction of photography at the gallery extends Hornby's back-and-forth between two and three dimensions, but where before this aspect was camouflaged, here it is conspicuous. And this time, the splicing of flat images onto material volume is fundamentally distorting, a quality which gives Hornby's recent sculptures a different subject from his previous works: the screen.

Hornby has superimposed the photography on the sculptures by a process of dipping, submerging the sculpture through a liquid image which melts around the volume of the sculpture. There is something inescapably digital about this, both in the sense that it serves as a physical, real-life filter or Photoshop-like manipulation, and in the fluidity of the image it generates. The screens of phones and computers on which images circulate are liquid – the 'L' in LCD. The pandemic has therefore only heightened the relevance of this quality: looping the space between online experience and that of the physical world so that it becomes one of equivalence.

The arrangement of the sculptures here, occupying the gallery evenly on plinths of various heights, is reminiscent of the tiered audience in a theatre, which again lends them a sense of being viewed from a specific vantage point. Interestingly, Hornby had originally planned to invite the audience to touch the sculptures. Although this was ultimately not possible (fear of fomites in a pandemic), the idea serves the series well, allowing the works to take on a tactility closer to that of fingers swiping a screen, where touch is built into the form but also configured as something imaginary. Similarly, Hornby's sculptures bring photographic image and sculptural volume together: part tactile, part at a remove, the imperfections of actual human skin sealed beneath an impeccable reflective glossy surface.

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