



CRISP

Charlotte Becket

26th August - 3rd October 2009

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CRISP presents the UK solo debut of New York-based artist, Charlotte Becket. Exploring the territory between a Sisyphean fertility and jubilant optimism, the exhibition uses references to pop psychology and the use of everyday materials. These kinetic sculptures move slowly - sometimes imperceptibly - performing gestures born from the banality of the human condition. Their looping, rhythmic motion transforms the sculptures from motorized machines to figural abstractions or landscapes.

The series, *Inkblot* (2009), includes wall mounted geometric forms with black-mirrored surfaces. The top of each mass has been sheared, producing a shelf-like form that strictly delineates between above and below. Underneath the plateau, crystalline abstractions accumulate to create an imposing Rorschach image. The rigid symmetrical landscape is punctuated with bulging rifts that slowly swell, either in a moment of expansion or deflation. As the forms slowly shift and redirect light they become hallucinogenic and unstable. They are sometimes landscapes, smoke, ships, heavy metal concert stages or balloons.

LONDON

Charlotte Becket
Open 12-6, Wed-Sat
3 Newman Passage, Fitzrovia, London W1T 1EG
Tel: +44 (0) 7837 861935

LOS ANGELES

Charlotte Becket
Open 12-6, Sat
1355 Westwood Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90024
Tel: +1 310 709 7688

Cover image: *Untitled (white blob)*, 2005.
Vinyl, wood, aluminum and motor, 60 x 86 x 86 in.

Right: *Cyclops* (2009), monofilament tape, plastic, metal and motor, 98 x 65 x 90, in., Pace University, New York, 2009

Other wall-mounted works include a sculpture entirely composed of black plastic strapping which creates a calligraphic line recalling the abstract paintings of Brice Marden and Cy Twombly. The piece is suspended between two facing walls, with a greater density near the walls and tapering out towards the middle of the room where the sides meet in a tenuous connection. The two sides slowly pull themselves apart and drift back together. This unfurled Gordian knot strains under the task of fusion and separation in an ambivalent tug of war.

Still works take the form of bloated bodies that creak and strain, endlessly moaning and muttering to themselves in an unresolved internal dialogue. These works couple the complexity of human behavior with the ambivalence of a reduced gesture.



A conversation between Charlotte Becket and Francesca Gavin, July 2009

Francesca Gavin: What drew you to sculpture?

Charlotte Becket: I love objects—the relationships between forms, the texture and quality of surfaces, how things are made and how parts join together. Making sculpture is a way of participating in the world of objects and materials, the world we are immersed in. I'm interested in the way sculpture has the potential to shift or alter our position to the built-up world around us.

FG: Many of your past pieces are kinetic or robotic. Can you describe how and why you've used movement in your pieces?

CB: Some of the kinetic pieces are machines that move very slowly working to perform and then undo the same task. Because the machines are all driven by a simple motor, they loop and cycle through their work endlessly. They work both in a state of futility and in an unconscious celebration of themselves. Some of the machines do very specific things; the machine in *Fixing the Cowlick* (2005) just smoothes down and curls up the same piece of paper. Other pieces like *Cyclops* (2009) have a giant gaping iris/sphincter that opens and closes, staring and breathing.

Some of the current work explores the idea of a double or split persona embroiled in an internal dialogue that fluctuates between a state of dissonance and collaboration. These forms stretch themselves apart and then mash back together again

in an ambivalent tug of war between fusion and separation. Their bulk is made up of black plastic strapping that twists and builds on itself becoming a dense calligraphic line, reminiscent of the abstract paintings of Bruce Marden and Cy Twombly. As the plastic mass is drawn out, a muddled and chaotic language is suggested. The plastic strapping, originally used to support and secure containers, becomes a massive unwieldy knot unable to contend with itself.

Other works play on the gesture of an opening mouth, again the pieces recall a double or split body. A single heap has two mouths gaping back and forth at each other as if they were engaged in a perpetually unresolved internal discourse. The mechanization in these pieces work in opposition to what we demand of the mechanized world around us. It seeks to offer something else, something that is slow and inefficient but more closely aligned with ourselves.

FG: What do you find interesting about using junk, garbage and found objects as a material?

CB: *The Wishing Well* (2005) is the main sculpture I made out of garbage. Before that I had been using found objects and commercial materials. At a certain point I was working on some pieces that were going nowhere and for months the only physical evidence of my work in the studio were piles of empty water bottles, sandwich bags, and packaging from tools and supplies. Eventually those garbage piles became my materials, they seemed the most real. Jean Dubuffet said, "Dirt, trash, and filth are man's companions during

his whole lifetime." Although I'm no longer using just trash to make my work, I still choose materials that are banal and ubiquitous, those materials are about life.

FG: How do you source your materials? What inspires you to use specific objects?

CB: I look for materials that have the capability of assuming multiple identities. These bits and pieces are culled from daily life and retain some of their original characteristics, but also become transformed in the way they are manipulated to make the sculpture. Paper and trash, for example, become sedimentary rock or oceans; plastic becomes skin; tape and glossy film become mirrors; wire and strapping become unorganized mechanical systems. The materials take the shape of bodies and landscapes wherein cyclical narratives play out.

In the current series *Ink Blot* (2009) I am using a commercial insulation tape that has a black-mirrored finish. The tape is applied in layers over geometric planes creating a mirrored skin that supports the structure. The top of the geometric mass has been sheared, producing a shelf-like form that strictly delineates between above and below. Underneath the plateau, crystalline abstractions accumulate to create an imposing Rorschach image. The rigid symmetrical landscape is punctuated with bulging rifts that slowly swell, either in a moment of expansion or deflation. As the forms slowly shift and redirect light they become hallucinogenic and unstable. They are sometimes landscapes, smoke, ships, heavy metal concert stages, or just balloons.

The Wishing Well (2005),
wood, trash and motors, 168 x 125 x 125 in.,
Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, OH, 2006





The black mirror surface retains some of its low-fi tape quality but also has the slickness of a manufactured product. The reflections produced by black mirrors have a strange way of creating a space that seems simultaneously flat and illusionistic. Because of their properties, black mirrors have been used historically to experiment with optics. English picturesque landscape painters in the late 18th and early 19th centuries used a device known as the Claude Lorrain Mirror, named after the French landscape painter whose work was considered to be the picturesque ideal. This tool is a slightly convex mirror made of black glass. The painter would turn their back on the scene being observed and paint only from the reflected image. The result was what Reverend William Gilpin described in his Essay on Prints (1768) as "that kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture... it gives the object of nature a soft, mellow tinge like the colouring of that Master." I like this idea, that you need a tool to see the world as it should be seen, or the "real truth." Clairvoyants claim that looking into a dark mirror allows the physical eyes to relax, thus letting the inner psychic eyes to begin to open and receive visions, a method called "scrying".

In the sculptures, the effect of the black mirror is laid over the image of the Rorschach test, another visual device that claims to unearth a true nature. By playing with commonplace materials, historical references and pop psychology tropes these pieces address how we construct imagery and meaning and how fickle and fragile these methods can be. Andy Warhol made a

series of Rorschach paintings in 1984. He claimed that he was going to attempt to perform a psychological evaluation on him self but said "All I would see would be a dog's face or something like a tree or a bird or a flower. Somebody else could see a lot more."

FB: Tell me a bit about your working methods. How do you create your work? Do you start from an idea or is it much more instinctive?

CB: You know when you are stuck in a frame of mind and suddenly everything around you seems to reflect your mood? That's often where I start. The work comes out of my own experiences and so in that sense it is instinctive. But once I begin making something I try to really examine how my response fits into a larger context. Then the idea becomes important and sets up criteria for how something can and cannot take shape. Because the pieces are kinetic and have certain practical limitations, I always have to resolve conflicts between what I want and what the materials will allow. This combination of problem solving in the end is what helps create the work.

FG: Is there an aspect to your work that is critical about consumerism or excess?

CB: Consumerism and excess are just part of the world we live in. I'm interested in the ways we are fallible and human. Greediness and vanity are base motivations, but they also stem from a sense of survival and a desire to gain acceptance. *White Blob* (2005) for example, is a heaping, smooth, and shiny body whose grotesque

"arms" alternate between lavishly massaging and anxiously sucking in its massive belly. The thing is disgusting and laughable but recognizable too.

FG: You're British but you currently live in New York. Do these different cultural contexts influence your sculptures in some way?

CB: I was born in England. Soon after, my parents moved to Holland where we lived until I was 10 and then we moved to the US. When I was growing up, England meant being at home with my English Mum and Dad. This was particularly true when we lived in Holland and we spoke British English at home and Dutch everywhere else. I remember going back to England in the summers and hearing English everywhere, it was really unnerving. Being English meant that my family and I had a private life, separate from the world at large. I think the notion of parallel worlds is embedded in how I think about things. In the work there is always the banal world we live in and the potential for another course of events within that world.

Ink Blot #1 (2009)

Insulation tape, Plastic, Foam, Motors 42 x 24 x 150 in.



Narcissus (2005),
Aluminum, cotton, mirror
and motor, 10 x 12 x 12 in.



180 Attempts/Hour (2004),
Notebook paper, wood and
motor, 9 x 12 x 3 in.



Fixing the Cowlick (2005),
wood, paper and motor,
38 x 17 x 14 in.

