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Liverpool Biennial 2021: The Stomach and the Port (Part II)

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Liverpool Biennial 2021: The Stomach and the Port (Part II)

by Lauren Velvick • 11.06.2021

For the first chapter of *The Stomach and the Port*, the proposed framework of entry points and trails seemed remote. Now, with the opening of the 'inside' chapter, as visitors are once again allowed to visit museums across the United Kingdom, the logic of the festival's curatorial conceit begins to materialise. As with any art festival or biennial, the route one takes from work to work – whether by curatorial design or personal preference – inevitably influences the perception of each project and their cumulative effect. In Liverpool, the proliferation of intricate narratives built through artistic research come together as the visitor moves between installations and spaces. There are three points of entry with three corresponding trails: Stomach (Waterfront), Porosity (Business District) and Kinship (City Centre Trail). Collectively, they facilitate opportunities for a subjective journey that weaves through the body of the city.

Although it is difficult to generalise the numerous works and exhibitions on show, the overall impression is one of challenging themes and urgent subject matter. These are often characterised by multidisciplinary research, which is shown alongside or as part of intensely intricate installations. There are a number of textile-based works, wherein the material's presence and cultural significance are haptic companions to more analytical and didactic elements – for example Sonia Gomes's sculptures on view at the Cotton Exchange Building, which are made from donated materials and evoke abstracted bodies through limb-like forms [FIG.1](#). Ebony G. Patterson's installation ... *when the cry takes root* ... takes over a corner of a gallery at Tate Liverpool; the walls are vibrantly papered, framing sculptures that are intricately hand embellished and gleam with an embarrassment of riches [FIG.2](#). In Ayesha Hameed's multichannel audio and textile installation *I sing of the sea I am mermaid of the trees* at the Lush Building, the artist uses dyed and printed fabric to construct an immersive environment for listening. Echoing among the suspended sheets, her narrative follows the implementation of the first undersea telegraphic cable laid between India and Britain, and considers links between communication and control [FIG.3](#). Similarly, Reto Pulfer's tent-like installation *hyperbolisch ratlos ortlos inhaltslos* (2015–21), comprising hand-sewn fabrics, recycled bedsheets, paper and wood, to which the artist has applied natural dyes to create 'environmental sculptures', offers a sensual counterpoint to some of the more informative works on show nearby at the Lewis's

Building FIG.4.

In the various groupings comprising this chapter of the Biennial, the deep significance of selected histories can reflect unfavourably on the more playful work that it is placed in close proximity with. For example, Christopher Cozier's *turbulence* FIG.5, two grids of oil-blot drawings suspended from the ceiling that explore the extraction and trade of raw materials and bodies in the Caribbean, is shown alongside Jenna Sutela's *Indigo, Orange and Plum Matter (I Magma cycle)* (2021) at the Lush Building FIG.6. The artist's head-shaped 'lava lamp' sculptures are notably part of a larger project that includes an interactive mobile app and other aspects not included here. However, the simple action of placing liquid wax inside a transparent head to suggest artificial intelligence jars in both tone and complexity with the other works on show, most notably that of Cozier.

As this pairing touches upon, showing works that explore non-human intelligence and interspecies kinship alongside those that investigate histories of exploitation in which dehumanisation has been a prerequisite can be problematic. Across the biennial's venues, the agency of plants and animals is placed in proximity with examinations of how global and local human cultures have been shaped by colonialism. In terms of how disparate works augment an understanding of one another other, this recurring conjunction operates on varying levels of success. For example, at Bluecoat, the films *Jíbie* (2019) by Laura Huertas Millán and *Fog Dog* (2020) by Daniel Steegmann Mangrané both offer accounts of harmonious and sacred, yet threatened interspecies relationships: Huertas Millán captures the importance of the coca leaf for the Muiná-Muruí community in the Colombian Amazon, while Steegmann Mangrané's film documents the community of stray dogs that inhabit the Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Haito*, by Sonia Gomes, at the Cotton Exchange

Building, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).

Also on display at Bluecoat are lustrous sculptural works by Kathleen Ryan, Roland Persson and André Romão, and paintings by Jadé Fadojutimi. The range of materials used in these works are an integral part of their meaning. Collectively, they offer a variety of musings on the transformation of decomposition, foregrounding interchange and reciprocity, eliciting a simultaneous bodily response of disgust and fascination. Persson's hyperreal sculptures depict monstrous plant life [FIG.7](#), while Ryan renders rotting fruit in opulent materials [FIG.8](#). Similarly, at the Lewis's Building, Ane Graff's goblets, full of unappetising cocktails, use material combinations to frame bodily and internal states as continuous and interdependent. Staged across three floors, the group exhibition offers explorations of symbiosis, codependence and the points at which our ability to perceive falters, or is ripe for subversion.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *... when the cry takes root ...*, by Ebony G. Patterson, at Tate Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).

Although the works on show at Open Eye, FACT and the Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Building provide some respite from these bodily themes of repulsion and attraction, there are further references to colonial devastation and cultural resilience. At Open Eye, Alberta Whittle's *between a whisper and a cry* (2019) draws on Kamau Brathwaite's (1930–2020) concept of tidalectics, emphasising the rhythms of breath and tides. Whittle's film cycles through references to routes of slave ships and storms in conjunction with ambiguous captions: a rumbling is defined as originating underground, laughter is classed as 'coy'. The cyclical nature of Whittle's film is mirrored in David Zink Yi's two-channel video installation *Horror Vacui* (2009) [FIG.9](#). Presented on its own in a darkened hall, with a simple row of chairs against one wall, it is

relatively long for a video piece. However, it soon becomes clear that the work is not designed to be viewed from start to finish. It moves through various combinations of musicians practicing together, with the sound from one clip overlaying and influencing the next. Zink Yi had originally been commissioned to produce a new live performance work, however this hypnotic installation nonetheless captures the atmosphere of Afro-Cuban polyrhythms for the unconverted observer.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *I sing of the sea, I am mermaid of the trees*, by Ayesha Hameed, at the Lush Building, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).

This foregrounding of rhythm, sonic structure and synchronous bodily response over linear progression is echoed throughout many of the works on show as part of *The Stomach and the Port*. Invernomo & Jim C. Nedd's short film *Grito – Las Brisas de Febrero* (2021), which explores Colombian picó culture, repeats several times over; Ines Doujak & John Barker's *Masterless Voices* (2014) retraces the roots of carnivals and the cultural importance of textiles in a series of highly stylised and often comedic scenes, where elements of movement and props appear and reappear

FIG.10. At FACT, the viewer is confronted and physically held by the work of B.O.S.S (Black Obsidian Sound System) – an audio-visual installation combining film, light, sound and sculpture. The darkened environment of *The Only Good System is a Soundsystem* offers a space for the viewer to sink into amid glossy plastic dividers and LED lights FIG.11. This frames their short film *Collective Hum* (2019), which explores the communal importance of nightlife and sound culture. However, the proliferation of auditorily impressive installations means that, unfortunately, this 'immersive' space is a little underwhelming. Meanwhile, in the gallery above, the protagonists of Zheng Bo's *Pteridophilia* series (2016-ongoing) engage with both the softness and rough edges of

the natural world, sensitively evoking the vulnerability and violent potential of both human bodies and plant life.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *hyperbolisch ratlos ortlos inhaltslos*, by Reto Pulfer, at the Lewis's Building, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).

When experiencing this iteration of the biennial, viewers should allow time to pursue the rhythm, and entry point, that captures them. Some works, such as Sohrab Hura's photographic series *The Coast* (2020) and multimedia installation *The Lost Head and the Bird* (2017), are presented as part of a group show but demand singular attention and repeated viewings. Others, like Luo Jr-shin's nightclub toilet installation, explain themselves succinctly, and are self-contained within overarching curatorial narratives. In addition, where older works have been included, likely in homage to the foundational thought of earlier generations, they pale in comparison with the new commissions, multisensory environments and layered, cyclical narratives that unfurl elsewhere. As such, the success and resonance of each work is necessarily dependent on the viewer's selected entry point. Works that may seem trite and incongruous as part of one trajectory could in fact allow for a profound reaffirmation if approached from another. In some cases, to the present reviewer, they seemed to exist in their own microclimate, indifferent to attention and speaking in languages we are not yet able to understand.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *turbulence*, by Christopher Cozier, at the Lush Building, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).



Fig. 6 *Magma*, by Jenna Sutela. 2019. Blown glass lava lamp head. (Photograph Moderna Museet, Stockholm).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Desire (Of a thoughtful kind)*, by Roland Persson, at Bluecoat, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Bad Fruit*, by Kathleen Ryan, at Bluecoat, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).



Fig. 9 Installation view of *Horror Vacui*, by David Zink Yi, at Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Building, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).



Fig. 10 Still from *Masterless Voices*, by Ines Doujak & John Barker. 2014. Video. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Ines Doujak).



Fig. 11 Installation view of *The Only Good System Is a Soundsystem*, by Black Obsidian Sound System (B.O.S.S), at FACT, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).

Exhibition details Liverpool Biennial 2021: The Stomach and
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