

A Mutating Story.

Jacob van der Beugel is an artist whose work shifts across boundaries. He shifts too. He is a Dutchman who has made his working life in the UK but whose practice can best be described as a long exploration of shapeshifting across geographical and conceptual borders. From his foundational experiences as a maker of singular ceramic vessels he has metamorphosed into an artist using multiple vessels to create lyrical installations. And then changed again into this new world of working alongside material scientists and geneticists as an interpreter of ideas.

There are continuities. Place is a fascination as you might suspect in the sensitivity that a potter has for the specificity of the ground under their feet, the clay. All clay is different. To choose this particular kind of clay is to signal an interest in this particular place. It is significant that so many creation myths start with the forming of a figure from clay and that the end of life is often referred to as a return to clay. Jacob writes that 'We're basically nothing, we are made up of context, we are, as the Dutch say, pulled from the clay.' This deep metaphorical underpinning between clay, place and person has manifested in some of the most ambitious site-specific installations made in the last decade. People and place come together in his work at Chatsworth, the quintessentially English house embedded in an Elysian landscape belonging to the Dukes of Devonshire. And, more recently in the creation of the DNA Room at Paleis Huis ten Bosch for the Dutch Royal Family, Jacob has brought symbolic identity to the fore, investigating how a family changes: 'identity is layered. That's why all these colours keep changing and shifting. Everything's always in flux, every identity is fluid- whether it's your individual identity, national identity, human identity...everyone exists by virtue of context- and context never stops changing...'

Ceramics are an art of transformation, the changing of material through fire. A finished ceramic vessel is a sublimation of all the activity that has gone into its creation: in TS Eliot's words 'The stillness, as a Chinese jar still/Moves perpetually in its stillness.' The jar is a contemplative symbol of resolution: an image of contemplative grace. Jacob's work takes this idea of transformation but brings it into fierce enquiry with mutation, how gene cells change and how these can be visualised. There is no stillness here. It is, he writes 'a mutating story.'

This is how stories actually work. Narratives can start from a singular moment- a glance, a frown- or an object or a person or an encounter or a place and *then* they mutate. They have 'a life of their own', develop in unexpected ways and directions, deepen, lose their way, change mood and tenor, cross over from one genre to another. And they can be returned to, worked on, patched-up and re-written. A story is a kind of palimpsest, one narrative just discernible below another. In this way Jacob's work can be read as a way of connecting lives and stories: we are not fixed. Our genes are in process. Our stories are still being written.

These four panels employ materials that span the whole of human history from ceramics to concrete. But crucially, Jacob understands how words mutate too. The image of concrete as unalienably fixed, a synecdoche for stasis is actually untrue. Concrete 'is in a constant process of dilapidation'. So here we stand before an artwork made from self-healing concrete, recycled concrete, mixed aggregate and liquid rust and we see an artist thinking and feeling his way into ideas and sensation, into histories and possibilities, into language.

And into beauty. For these are beautiful works. Stephen Greenblatt wrote that significant art should contain both 'resonance and 'wonder': resonance to take us out into the world and wonder to stop us with the presence of beauty. Jacob does this triumphantly.

By Edmund de Waal.