

Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Year 2

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Assessment Component 1: EXHIBITION - DYNEVOR

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Tower: context and development of ideas in light of exhibition

Holding a group exhibition part-way through the second term of second year offers an exciting chance to present and witness work which is still in progress. My contribution to the exhibition was the first resolution of an experiment that I had started in first year. The work, *Tower*, emerged from experimenting with casting newspaper pulp, using corrugated cardboard from furniture packaging as an initial mould. The appearance of the cast material, its grey, uneven and rough character and the likeness to concrete, suggested a sense of urban-ness, urban construction or decay, and (given the dimensions of the first piece, a long oblong 15x60cm) concrete tower blocks.



Fig 1. Process of casting newspaper pulp 'concrete' onto corrugated cardboard mould. Author's images.

Researching the work of artists such as Rachel Whiteread and Marwan Rechmaoui, and thinking about actual contexts as varied as the Heygate Estate in London (demolished 2012-15), the Quatro Estações tower in Maputo (demolished in 2007), the many half-completed tower blocks in present-day Luanda, and the horror of Grenfell, I searched for a form with which to cast the front side of a tower block to look like windows. The insert of a dairy milk chocolate advent calendar worked well and turned out to be exactly half the length of the longer side panel.

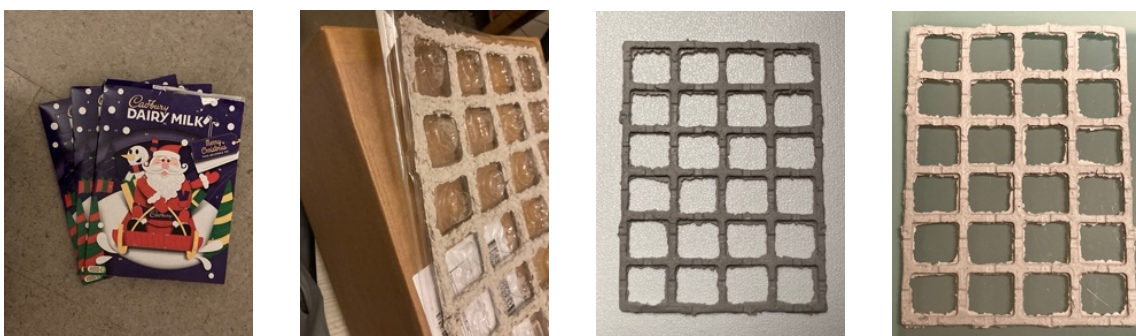


Fig 2. Making cast newspaper pulp using advent calendar insert mould. Author's images.



Fig 3. *Quatro Estações* tower in Maputo, prior to demolition in 2007.
Source: blog of Mozambican sociologist Carlos Serra (no longer online); photos by Fátima Ribeiro.

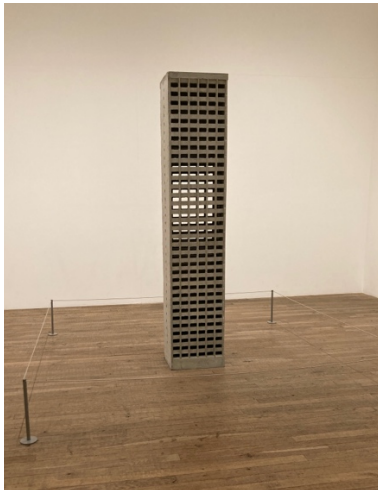


Fig 4. *Monument for the Living*, 2001-8.
Marwan Rechmaoui.
Author's image.



Fig 5. C: *Trowbridge Estate*, London E9; *Hannington Point*; *Hilmarton Point*; *Deverill Point*; June 1995. 1996.
Rachel Whiteread.
Source: tate.org.uk.

After completing all the 'concrete' components I researched potential mechanisms of attachment. The material fragility of the newspaper 'concrete' ruled out using pins to hold the pieces together. I found a recipe to make casein glue, which worked well. Casein glue has a long history going at least as far back as Ancient Egypt (Fay 2005: 10-11). It can be made from basic household ingredients (skimmed milk, white vinegar, bicarbonate of soda and water), which was consistent with the 'domestic' processes and materials I had used so far in the development of the project.



Fig 6. Wall carving from Tomb of Rekhmire showing the use of casein glue. Source: Fay 2005 p. 10.



Fig 7. Making and applying casein glue to assemble tower. Author's images.

Tutorial discussion with Alex (23 February) led to quick abandoning of the idea of using an existing plinth to display the work in the exhibition. The question of how to display a three-dimensional work is not neutral and requires careful consideration. The display of sculpture on plinths is a practice rooted in European tradition. Whether in a private mansion, art gallery, national museum collection or outside in a public square, the plinth has been associated over centuries with the projection of state, class, monarchical and imperial power (Macdonald 1998, p. 1-17; Berger 1972 p. 80).



Fig 8. Examples of traditional plinths displaying sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Author's images.

Instead of unwittingly incorporating these longer associations through the unquestioning use of a plinth, we considered from scratch how the practical demands of display could be met. For best viewing, the tower needed to be lifted a certain height from the floor, and positioned at a reasonable distance from the wall (so, probably not on a shelf). I decided to make a frame out of steel. Seeing a roadwork sign, on the way home after the tutorial, suggested that this method might resonate with the visual language of building and construction, and so exist in some kind of substantive aesthetic relation with the work as well as performing the function of holding it up. This decision also implied acquisition of new skills in planning and fabricating (with Dan's help) the construction of a basic welded structure.



Fig 9. Signs used for roadworks and construction sites with steel support structures. Author's images.

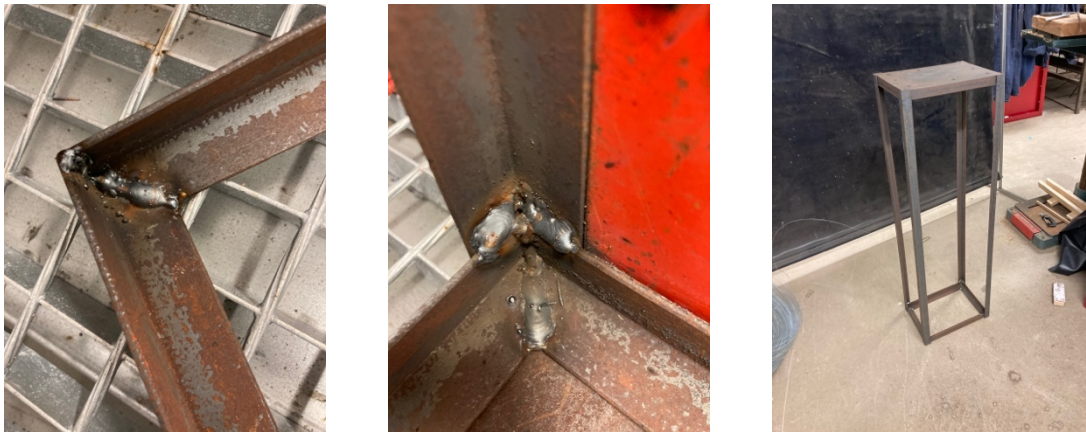


Fig 10. Making the steel support structure. Author's images.

Assembling a group exhibition

The process of planning and assembling the group exhibition went through several stages of collective discussion. These included a group visit to the Swansea Open and His Dark Materials exhibitions at the Glynn Vivian; presentation of individual proposals and initial consideration of possible locations for specific works; collective discussion of revised proposals and images of the work in the classroom followed by a group walk around the available spaces during which we started to map out a sense of the location of works. This succession of group discussions was important given the diversity of works and the available spaces. The works included a majority of two dimensional pieces (painting, photography, drawing) of varied sizes; sculptural installations; and performance. The spaces consisted of the lobby area, corridors, reading room, photography studios, and various alcove-like spaces. Discussing everyone's work together, over several weeks, enabled a working out of what went where in a manner which considered how individual works would best be displayed and the relationships between neighbouring works. The aim of a group show is that each student's work is well displayed with sufficient space to breathe, all works are equally significant, and the works are positioned to draw the visitor along through the exhibition. After seeing the Swansea Open, we agreed collectively not to try to present works in groups according to theme or material nor to use a 'salon' style hanging (Obrist 2014 p. 27), but to consider each work in the relevant space and in relation to neighbouring works so as to achieve a dynamic

mix of material, style and subject matter which would sustain the interest and curiosity of the visitor. Thematic grouping of work can lead to an individual work getting lost in a set of, say, portraits.

A sense of group collaboration emerged tangibly from the process of discussing and dividing up tasks. We discussed together the exhibition title, design of the poster, catalogue and online promotion, and different individuals or groups got on with various tasks. We communicated regularly among both Fine Art and Photography using WhatsApp, Teams and weekly in-person meetings. Skills and qualities of diplomacy, persuasion, compromise, creativity, mutual support and humour were apparent within the group. We worked well together. There was a strong sense of purpose and energy during the days leading up to installing the show. My own contributions were prepping and helping to paint the Fine Art corridor walls; helping to organise and run the bar; and preparing the exhibition map and signage.



Fig 11. Painting the corridor walls with Anastasia in preparation for the exhibition. Author's images.

Evaluating my work in the exhibition

My work was displayed in a corner opposite the doors into Stiwdio Griffith and beside the doors leading to the Fine Art corridor. This was a dynamic location, in between the lobby area and the next corridor section of the exhibition. In a sense

the work was on its own, not directly next to another work. I think the result was good: the space was a good size for the work, and the work inhabited the space well in relation to the rest of the exhibition, as a point between two adjacent spaces of the show, the lobby and the corridors.



Fig 12. Location of work in exhibition at the point of transition between lobby and corridor. Author's image.

The corner space was dark and needed additional lighting. I discussed possibilities with Dan and Lyndon, who initially offered (and acquired permission) to drill through the ceiling to extend a lead from a socket in the corridor. Instead Dan removed a wall panel to reveal a power socket we knew was there, and found an Angle-poise lamp. The lamp connected for me, conceptually, with the idea of an architectural model. A tutorial discussion with Craig (2 March) had focused on the scale of the work: if it was smaller it would be a toy or gimmick; if it was much larger it would be a sculpture; its actual size (in fact determined by the size of the packaging materials used to make the moulds) was suggestive of a model. I found this intriguing as it adds to the conceptual ambiguity of the work. The work is suggestive of a range of actual contexts which the viewer might have in mind, rather than referencing any one particular site. The sense of rough concrete is suggestive of a half-finished, abandoned or half-destroyed tower, perhaps a ruin. The idea of a model of a ruin is a contradiction, because the model typically

embodies the projection of futures, whereas a ruin might embody the failure of those original hopes. The model is utopian; the ruin is dystopian.

Positioning the lamp on the floor meant that the shadow was cast up the wall behind the tower, leading the viewer's gaze up the height of the tower and on up the wall behind. The strength of the shadow depended not only on the lamp light but on the broader ambient light which varied considerably according to time of day and weather conditions. After discussion with Adam (25 April) I subsequently replaced the bulb with a stronger daylight bulb which cast stronger shadows. However in the end I reverted to the original bulb. The shadows are striking and widely commented on, but for me they are not the most important element of the work. The brightness of the new bulb seemed to want to draw extra attention to the work in a way I did not like in the context of a group show, so I re-inserted the original bulb.



Fig 13. Contrast between light and shadows from the original 40W filament bulb and new 60W LED daylight bulb. Author's images.

The corner is L-shaped with a wide space on the long edge. I would have liked to assemble at least one other tower but, given the need to also construct a second display structure, there was not enough time. In discussion with Holly (30 March) I decided the best option to fill that space would be prints of a work I had done in

first year, using photoshop to present images of tower blocks on the Heygate as if Gordon Matta-Clarke had visited.

In my view this element was less successful. It turned out the resolution of the photoshop work was low which limited how large I could print them. I chose an A6 size which is suggestive of an amateur photo developed at Boots or Jessops (in pre-digital times) or of a postcard. This worked reasonably well. However, given the size of the images and the lack of title, I realised that most people would not notice the Matta-Clark visual references and would just assume that the photos were connected directly to the tower structure, to indicate its actual referent. This in fact undermines the deliberate lack of referential specificity of the Tower work.

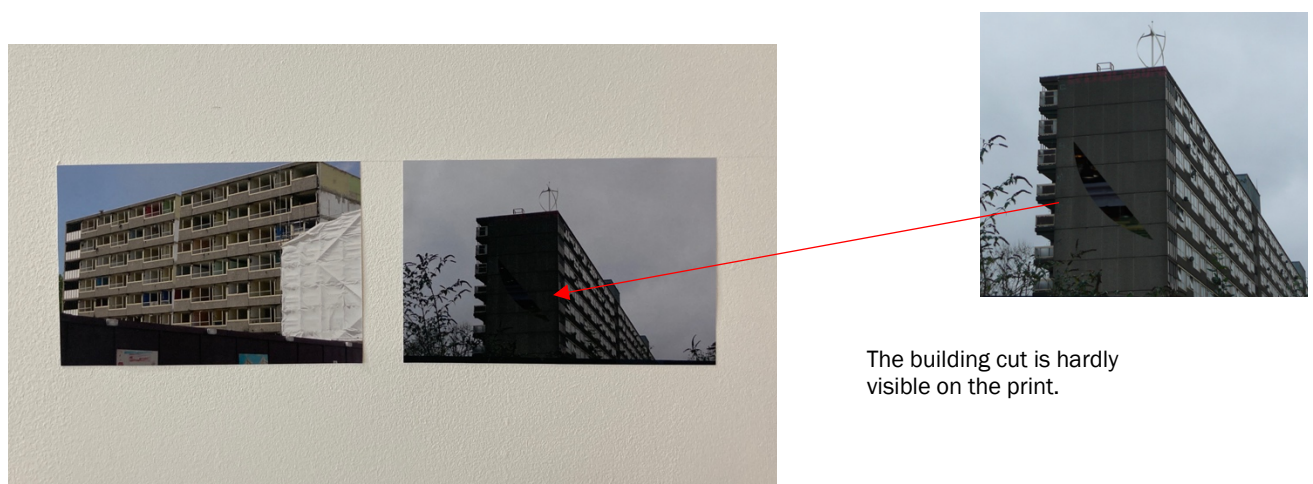


Fig 14. Indication of postcard size prints, alongside the original inspiration for these prints (below), and how the effect disappears given the size and (in the second case) relative darkness of the prints. Author's images.



Fig 15. *Splitting*, 1974. Gordon Matta-Clark.
Source: <https://publicdelivery.org>



Fig 16. *Day's End*, 1975. Gordon Matta-Clark.
Source: <https://champ-magazine.com>

Two lessons are suggested from this for continuing to develop this work. First, I will create more towers, of varying dimensions, to experiment with showing a group of them (a point raised in the 'reverse crit', 26 April). Second, inspired by Rachel Whiteread's drawings (Presenti 2010), I will try to develop some drawings as part of the making process as I build more towers, so that next time I will have two-dimensional elements which relate to and are part of the same project.

A final lesson which came out of this exhibition experience is the fundamentally collaborative process which underpins all art making and exhibiting. This point is often made by visiting artists (for example Casper White most recently). The presentation of work of each individual participant in a group show relies significantly on support from the other participants, the curators/organisers (Holly and Paul), and others (in particular, in my case, Dan, Lyndon, Dafydd and Alex).

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