

MILLERS O'BRIEN

Show and feel: the sculptures of Caitlin Devoy

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I visit Caitlin Devoy at her studio in the run-up to her first dealer show, *Display*. My initial impression is of a queer kind of museum. A long, low bench supports a parade of squeezey bottles of mustard and jars of mayonnaise. They're not the real things but immaculate casts made of pink silicone and black rubber urethane, visibly supple. Tall Perspex boxes are threaded with replicas of recorders: equal parts snake and charmer's flute. A table is topped with a jelly mould or Bundt cake and a cannister of what appears to be Tatura Dairy Whip cream. In another context, such entities might seem innocuous, even banal. But Devoy has inspirited them, turned them wondrously weird.

The artist refers to her recent sculptures both as sex objects and as male nudes. The casts do indeed evoke the 'private parts' of men, sometimes in appearance, sometimes in function. Recorders are undeniably phallic, and they are blown to often cacophonous effect. A ring jelly resembles a butthole (as well as a haemorrhoid pillow), and it gets eaten. A mustard bottle might not look much like a cock, but it squirts sympathetically. The materials from which the facsimiles are made underscore the eroticism, also being used in the production of sex toys and other fetish gear.

I ask Devoy about the lineage of her work. What started it all? She removes the bubble wrap from a nearby object to reveal a 2017 sculpture, likewise titled *Display*. It noticeably foreshadows her recorder works, *Play (Black)* and *Play (Pale)* (2019), taking the form of a Perspex box reminiscent of a vitrine or plinth. One wall is tinted warm pink, a colour at once stereotypically feminine and evocative of naked white bodies. In the wall is a perforation that suggests a glory hole, implying a performance yet to be carried out.

The sculpture burlesques lingering notions of women as things to be penetrated, vessels for carrying children, and providers of support (focussed, like museum display devices, on the protection and elevation of entities beyond themselves). Viewed from certain angles, the work almost disappears, alluding to the difficulty of achieving visibility in the art world as a woman. At the same time, it pokes fun at the male figure on which it logically centres. For a man to stick his penis through the hole would hardly be empowering. He would be dismembered, objectified, subjected not only to desirous looking, but also to judgment and ridicule. I'm suddenly struck by another motivation for Devoy's use of the recorder: its distinctly undistinguished status.

The bench work, *Have a Seat (2)* (2019), similarly follows on from a 2017 piece, *Have a Seat*, which incorporated the same wooden legs and frame. Responding in part to Barnett Newman's claim that 'sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting'¹, Devoy created a seat of the sort typically found in galleries. The top of the bench was a Perspex trough (again, rather vitrine-like), which she filled with candy-floss-coloured gelatine. The resulting object, elegantly minimal, read as sculpture and furniture, recalling experiments with both by the likes of Donald Judd. Its relatively small scale and the use of a soft, perishable substance served to counter monumental and robust sculptures made by male artists throughout history.

Have a Seat answered high seriousness with silliness. Devoy intended viewers to imagine, if not to enact, the slapstick consequences of putting the bench to use. Where *Have a Seat (2)* suggests penetration of the sitter by the seat, its predecessor implied an opposite action: bum plummeting into jelly-pillow, body keeling over as the stuff gave way. The use of a palpably sticky substance enticed violation of the usual gallery prohibition against touching the art. Countless visitors succumbed to temptation, giving the surface a poke, even a gentle slap.

In subsequent works, Devoy sought to further amp up the element of allure. She made her first facsimiles in silicone, beginning with a fire extinguisher and cream canisters of the sort sometimes used in sex play. They proved seductively bodily, mimicking the translucency of skin, the pliancy of slack muscle, and the jiggle of fat, as well as the sideways flop of dicks deflating post-orgasm. Placed within reach of the viewer, they cried out to be played with, an effect reinforced by the actions typically associated with them. Who doesn't want to squirt whipped cream from an aerosol, or—better yet—make an extinguisher blast all over the place?

Devoy has since redeployed her casts in a number of contexts. In 2018, she incorporated them into a pair of kinetic sculptures, termed *ErotoMetronomes*. These built on earlier interactive and performance works, such as *Dennis* (2018), a 'moon hopper' with a pendulous faux penis, and *BinJelly* (2018), which saw Devoy tip a jelly on to a plate, causing it to dance unexpectedly. Not a little evocative of a ride-on sex device, *ErotoMetronome (Cream Dance)* included a quartet of aerosols standing on their bases, three upright, the fourth bent over acrobatically, curling to rest its head on the table-top. The structure bounced up and down slowly, like a mechanical bull running out of steam. The casts wiggled, oddly off beat, evoking clumsy dance or sexual partners.

The *ErotoMetronomes* were the first works by Devoy that I encountered. Despite the fact that they formed part of a group show focussed on questions of sexuality and gender², it took me a moment to recognise their erotic connotations. The largeness of the casts obscured their penile nature, while the emphasis on commodity cream and the faintly bovine quality of the display structures had me pondering notions of the dairy industrial complex. It was only when I peered closely and spied specks of dust collecting on the silicone that the penny dropped. I snorted, envisioning a dildo hastily flung into a linty smalls-drawer.

Devoy's sculptures are not exactly subtle in their suggestiveness, but nor are they explicit. I am reminded rather of jokes for parents that appear in children's movies. Kids might well laugh at these works, too, but for tamer reasons: because uncanny copies are always delightful, wobbly things always amusing. For adults, there is an extra pleasure. Devoy gets at the splendid peculiarity of our bodies and the things we do with them, emphasising the ways in which sex acts resonate with other performances of daily life: dancing, eating, music-making, excreting. Things that are fun and things that are funny.

To be sure, there are also more sober elements to Devoy's practice. Her emphasis on squidgy bits invites interrogation of pervasive standards of male beauty and virility. Whence all this emphasis on bulk and solidity? Isn't there something rather irresistible about a good flop and jiggle? Trained from young in ballet, Devoy speaks of growing up with the immaculate physiques of male dancers as a norm. At thirty-three, I continue to battle an eating disorder nearly half my age, aimed in part at getting me closer to such physiques. Sex and food intertwine in multiple and complex ways.

Perhaps most importantly, Devoy's works raise questions about touching, the desire to do it, and when it is appropriate. Her mayonnaise jars are made for looking at rather than handling, but no doubt more than a few visitors will sneak in a fondle. I ask Devoy whether her casts are difficult to keep clean. She explains that, like sex toys, they can be given a soapy bath. Dust and fingerprints quickly fall away. It occurs to me that our own bodies are rather different—or can be. Muck is one thing, but other marks are harder to get off. And far too many of us still choose to ignore the clearest of 'hands-off' signs.

1. See, for example, Rosalind Kraus, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 36

2. The show was *Imminent Domain*, curated by Robbie Handcock, which ran at play_station space in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington from 25 May to 15 June 2019