

ABOUT THIS FOLDER.

This conversation takes place via e-mail and stretches through the whole period during which the artist develops their initial idea into final results. 1646 invites the correspondent at the other end of this contact to figure his/her way through this actual process. In trying to picture what result the artists' work is getting to, such exchange can become a reflection on the amount of otherwise untraceable choices of the moment which make up to the artists' practice.

This issue is part of the exhibition by Molly Palmer, *Mechanism of a lock*, December 20, 2019, in 1646.

This artist
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MECHANISM OF A LOCK

OPEN

1646.

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REBECCA JAGOE
IN CONVERSATION WITH
MOLLY PALMER

OCTOBER 27: REBECCA JAGOE (RJ) TO MOLLY PALMER (MP)

Hello!

I am such a superfan of your work, it is so great to have a space to discuss it properly. Thanks so much for asking me to do this.

A lot of your work feels like it hovers in the space between objects that are animate, and bodies which are material, not in a way that reproduces a hierarchy of Human > animal > plant > object, but instead suggests how all of these things are horizontal. Clothes feel like they become characters in your films, your sculptures feel like bodies (without being anthropomorphised) and narratives are as much led by the props and objects in the films as the actors. Or maybe it's that the objects are actors. Anyway, I was wondering what objects you are creating for this show, if any? And do you view them as characters or actors, or are you more interested in how they collide or impact with the actors in your work?

Ok, second question is more generally about your process of making. I've been thinking a lot about how your works create incredibly rich and elaborate worlds. I always wonder, do you have a fixed idea of these worlds, which you then work to translate into the work, or do the worlds create themselves through the process of making?

I hope this makes sense! Look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Love

R xxx

OCT 9: MP - BJ

Hello to you!

I'm also very happy to have this space to discuss my work with you. Thank you for taking part in the conversation.

It's great that you read the relationship between the animate and material elements in my work as horizontal rather than hierarchical. I want the distinction between these states of being to be fluid - to suggest a symbiosis between elements, or a reciprocal exchange of energy and symbolic potential. For the show I am creating several sculptural objects that sit alongside the videos, all of which are in some sense bodily. This ranges from an indirect anatomical reference in the artery-like forms of *Mechanism of a Lock* (in which clay lattices based on medieval key designs hang from a copper pipe) to a direct depiction of limbs in *Crossing Over (Fountain)* in which a series of plaster arms suggests a flow of liquid. There is also a more literal body present in *Crossing Over (Goddess of Oblivion)* - a life size depiction of a headless Goddess. This last sculpture has definitely become a character or an actor in relation to the other objects in the room, and in the wider body of work. Even though she is headless, she unavoidably directs attention depending on how she is placed. It's quite strange navigating this presence, and the dynamics she creates between objects and viewers within the space. She is based on the Goddess Lethe, who greets people as they cross over into the underworld, asking them to drink from the River of Forgetfulness (the river Lethe) and to choose whether they want to forget everything or know everything. I like the absoluteness of this decision, and also the enigma of the Goddess, whose only role in mythology is to ask this question, in this way becoming a holder for the desires of the passing.

I have made her both headless and hollow to reflect the elusiveness of her persona, with so little detail of her background or character available and yet so much power and intrigue.

The other objects are more self-contained, though there are definite links to the actors and scenes in the film. For example, the ceramic forms hanging from the copper pipes in *Mechanism of a Lock* echo the lattice-like clay form found in a pool by the waterfall in the film. In their solidity and obvious weight they become a mutation of this shape, underlining the transience of the underwater form, which appears for less than thirty seconds. I am also interested in this idea of a collision or impact on the actors in the work. I've been trying to develop a more porous membrane between the physical and ephemeral, so that the sculptural objects from the room and the actors, images and music from the film drift from one state to another and back again. I like the idea that some objects appear only in the film (such as the celestial organs at the start of *Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain*) and that all the attention and care that goes into making them becomes compressed into this transient animated encounter, while the objects in the room hold attention at a different pace.

The worlds in my work definitely create themselves through a process of making rather than developing from a set intention at the start of a project - I sometimes feel I have very little control over the outcome as a whole. I usually begin with an object, an image or a song, and this generates new ideas for objects, costumes, music and other scenes. Mostly these are augmented by research in libraries and archives such as Wellcome Trust or Aby Warburg Institute where I let my existing ideas swirl around with the new material that I find. I switch around between media constantly, so that

often the different strains of making cross-pollinate and influence each other. For example, the pattern that I stitched on the costumes for the film became a template for the painted lines on the large fabric work I am showing, which are based on cracks on the surface of glazed ceramics. I think this is how the world-making comes about, woven together bit by bit over time, although really it remains something of a mystery to me. Maybe that's why I pursue this way of working - the minute I fully understand a process I begin looking for a new one, so I am never in full control of the outcome. I like being surprised by the work in this way, to have the chance to be kidnapped by something I didn't expect.

And now I must go back to the studio, so much to do! Look forward to hearing your thoughts, and thanks for your insightful questions!

Much love,
M xxx

NOV 25: RJ - MP

Hello!

Sorry for the delay in replying, I have been stewing over things for a while and wanted to take time to think about how to respond. I had never heard of the Goddess Lethe. What you say about her role as a holding place seems really important. I have been thinking recently about the agency that is afforded (or suppressed) when a person (although I am not sure if I can use the word person for a Goddess) functions as metaphor or as a device in narrative. It is an odd thing that Western mythology occupies this space whereby the Gods and humans are seen to be tropes that perhaps lack an originary, and so your choice to make her a vessel, not just for

the people with whom she converses, in a limited capacity, but also for whatever contingent role she plays in a larger narrative, feels like it invokes the small tragedy of her limited existence. It also makes me think of the talking door knockers in *The Labyrinth*: whenever I watch this scene I feel this enormous sadness for the two heads, whose entire life is so restricted, particularly the poor head who has to hold the brass ring in his mouth. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekZiFrMUyiY) It is odd that in many ways, Lethe, as a Goddess, would be seen to be the superior to humans who come to her, and she has such enormous power over their fate, and yet the structure of her life is entirely centred around theirs, and also feels so shackled to this very restricted role. Do you think that making her in ceramic, this material that outlasts almost every other material on the planet, and so fixing her to this seat, also highlights the throne as a form of imprisonment? But then maybe I am seeing her life through a very anthropocentric idea of what constitutes a life, and life being oriented around very specific and normative ideals and goals around which to structure your life. *Fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealising theories and tableaux about how they and the world "add up to something."* *What happens when those fantasies start to fray - depression, dissociation, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash?* (Lauren Berlant) So maybe Lethe has just moved beyond this. It's probably presumptuous and anthropocentric of me to think that the life of a Goddess is comparable to that of a human. Maybe Lethe is happy as she is. Like you say so well, she is completely unknowable and elusive.

This connection to lock mechanisms that also look like capillaries again feels like it really plays on this ambiguity

around bodies as metaphors or carriers for meaning, except it feels like there is no clear teleology. It is not clear which is a metaphor for which, it's not bodies as architecture or architecture as bodies, and kind of feels like it questions a nature/culture dichotomy, so culture and the cultural production of objects is itself biological. Pipes are not representing the biological, they are biological. Does that make sense?

And then when you say later about how different motifs have informed different objects and images, such as the lines in the costume, which become something else. It makes me think a lot about early microscopy and also early photography, and the fascination with the microcosm and macrocosm and finding the repetition of certain forms and patterns across vastly different scales. Like the photography of Karl Blossfeldt or the illustrations of Ernst Haeckel, but also the drawings of Eva Hesse, which I would be wary of describing as abstract, as some of them really do describe a something, something between animal and plant and pipes in a building.

Also, I find the fact that the objects are so invested with time, and then occur so transiently, really beautiful, and definitely feels like it points back to the creation of an entire cosmogony that unfolds in your work. A little like the endless appendices that existed for Lord of the Rings. Do you think of these works as appendices, or footnotes, and would you ever show them again? What happens to them after the work is made? Do you keep hold of them?

Look forward to hearing your thoughts, and sorry again for delay.
Sending love

R x



DEC 1: MP - RJ

Hello hello!

My turn to be slow - I've been working on a new film for the show and have been completely sucked into video world.

I like your reading of the objects in my films as appendices or footnotes - I sometimes also think of them as an accumulating alphabet of sorts, symbolic or hieroglyph-like forms that leave an imprint and then disappear. This new film features ten clay forms, each of them only seen for 10 seconds or so. They are lattice-like forms taken from shapes formed by a group of women viewed from above. I'm interested in moments of recognition, a meaningful shape as opposed to a meaningless one - a feeling of rightness that is fleeting and distinct, and then fixing that in a form.

I do keep all the objects from my films, which usually just end up as decoration in my studio and get moved around with me from place to place. It's strange how there is some kind of distinction between a sculpture and a prop - I suppose this is only based on their appearance in the film but I've often felt that it's hard to escape, even when I'm making objects that don't appear in any films. Usually they are limited by having a big hunk of green screen painted wood stuck to the back or something but this time I made the clay forms with the possibility of showing them alongside the film (fixings in the back to hang them on a wall). They won't appear in this show but I'm curious to see how they will change or affect the video when they appear alongside it. In the film they are transparent and floating, like ghost forms. I'm interested in this fluctuation between states - their solid presence in a gallery and their instability and transience within the film. Maybe I should consider showing them this time!

There is something about the permanence of ceramics that really appeals to me - even though the pieces are fragile and often get broken in transit. Where the Goddess is concerned it actually worries me a bit - having made something so big and permanent and now feeling this sense of responsibility towards her. I definitely also have anthropocentric feelings towards her - and towards Lethe as a mythological figure. When I discovered her randomly during a research session at Aby Warburg Institute (an amazing library in London where books are organised by association instead of author or topic) I did feel a certain sadness in this figure who exists purely for one function. Like the door knockers in *The Labyrinth* (great reference) it seems she is tied to that spot and doesn't have any opportunity to live her own life. I suppose the permanence of the material and her rootedness to the seat is a form of imprisonment that reflects this limited existence. It must become pretty repetitive asking the same question over and over again for all eternity.

The Lauren Berlant quote feels very pertinent to my motivations for making her. I started building her to try and claw my way out of a period of depression and creative block. I'd had this drawing in my studio for a couple of years, since reading about Lethe, and had kind of assumed I'd never have the time or facilities to make her. At that time I'd become pretty nihilistic about the world "adding up to something" and was desperate to access a state of fantasy to revive my belief in basic existence. I don't know if making her achieved this goal but it got me through a period where the world was essentially an incoherent mash. Sometimes it's important to just create a reason to get up in the morning, to face your demons and attempt to form new connections that can help pull you out of depression, dissociation or cynicism. Either way it

makes me feel quite connected to her - as if we have some kind of solidarity. Her title, "Goddess of Oblivion" is not just a reference to mythology, but also to the struggles that so many of us have with life. The difficulties that possess people from time to time to yearn for total oblivion, through suicide, sleep, alcoholism, drugs. It's strange how the world can become so frightening and unbearable at times, when a month later it can return to a benign and manageable place. Do you ever have these feelings?

Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain (the other video that I'm showing) is also about this - about the way we construct reality, and the struggles that those imposed realities create for us emotionally and metaphysically. This links to what you say about culture and cultural production of objects being biological - they become part of our physiology, influencing our behaviour and our emotions. The film centres around a series of riddles, and maybe the objects in the show are also riddles in a sense - the invisibility of the mechanism of a lock and the specificity but ultimately the mystery of the forms used to unlock it. Like you say, there is an ambiguity there. The riddles are about things that we consider basic facts of reality - such as currency and language - which seem so solid but the more you unpick their construction the more complex and arbitrary they become. Thinking about early microscopy and the repetition of forms and patterns makes me realise that that is one of the central preoccupations in my work - for some reason that sense of recognition in something that repeats (albeit with developments and convolutions) also offers a sense of comfort to me, which is something I tend to chase. This has sometimes been a criticism aimed at my work, that it is too soothing or comforting - but I suppose that's ultimately my aim, to face down things that are upsetting,

dark or frightening and transform them into something hopeful, that can create hope for others too.

And now I must go and finish off the sound for the new video. I hope I've adequately answered your amazing letter - you have a knack of casually opening up these huge topics! I find myself reading your emails over and over again, and finding new sentences to respond to every time. It feels good to be pushed into articulating these things further - looking forward to more Jagoé magic soon!

Much love
Molly

DEC 13: BJ - MP

Hello!

Thank you so much for such a wonderful reply, there is so much to think on and respond to.

It's interesting you bring up the distinction between prop and sculpture, this is something I sometimes chew over. I feel like with my own work, the distinction I draw between prop and sculpture is often a case of fungibility. I do make both, and the line between the two is not whether it is used in performance or not, as there are sculptures that I have used in performance, and props which I have displayed on their own. For me, if the object is a stand-in for something (almost like a three dimensional drawing), or has a replaceability, that to me feels like it is a prop, whereas if the importance of the object is rooted in its singularity, and its specific materiality as bounded to that object, I tend to think of that as a sculpture. However, I would never presume to say this is a hard and fast rule for all artists, rather this is

something that is around my own production. Do you think this is true of your work? Particularly as so many of your works have been in ceramics, which has such a particular materiality to it: as both fragile, as you say, and also eternal. This is also not to speak of props in a way that is disparaging, as there is something really interesting in the idea of an object which is in some way pretending to be another object, or an object which is made to refer to an archetype. It's funny, though, how you describe objects which have a hunk of green screen on them, or specific wall fixings: I often feel like when I do make something that has fixings on it, it only becomes itself once it is fully in place. So with the objects with green screen on them, if they are not props, in that they might not be fungible, perhaps they are only sculptures once they are in the film?

I saw the photo you took of the Goddess in the crate, with all of the padding surrounding her. There's so much trust involved in handing over the care of the work you make to other people. It really does highlight the fact that once you make an object, really you are little more than a custodian of it.

What you say about making in order to pull yourself out of something feels so incredibly and deeply resonant. Some of the most meaningful work (and that is meaningful for me, personally, rather than the work which necessarily produces the most meaning) is work that I have made through the need to simply give shape to a day, to try and escape this oblivion you so well articulate. Also, the fact that you mention connection feels really important. For me, I am not able to write, or to articulate, in these periods, but physical making feels so necessary. It is as though putting something into the

world, feeling as though I can enact some kind of change on my material surroundings, is a grounding reminder of my own existence, and counters feelings of disempowerment that can feel a bit overwhelming. Thank you so much for articulating this. Do you similarly find a distinction between modes of working, in terms of writing, and digital media, as opposed to physical making?

Thanks so much for speaking so openly about what must feel a very vulnerable topic. In my own work, I use a lot of stuff to do with my own mental illness as content, but I always walk a very fine line about how much to include and how much to leave out. Even still, despite the fact that there is a constant discussion in my own mind, and with other people, about these boundaries, I feel there is often a cultural shaming that surrounds this kind of disclosure, as though it is an embarrassing overshare, as though I have no boundaries and somehow verbally vomited out all of this information about myself. Do you ever feel this, when it comes to uses of the personal in both your own work, and your discussion of it?

Your references to the construction of reality also feel really valuable, especially as your works do create worlds which entirely function on their own logic, not as a counterpoint or surrealist spin on Western scientific rationalism, but rather they feel like a very real alternative for a paradigm of reality. I've begun reading around histories of art therapy, outsider art and the relationship between mental illness and the art world. Within a western history of medicine, so much of this work has historically been really problematic because the works have had this idea of the *mad genius* or *savant* who might produce works of brilliance, but not actually be in control of their own

production. And as this work is seen to require interpretation, be that from healthcare professionals (who sometimes used art work produced in art therapy to try to decode their symbolism and gain access to the patients' trauma) or through the idea of insiders in the art world, curators, etc... who contextualise the work overwhelmingly through biography and patient history (such as how Richard Dadd's work is often talked about). I am not saying this is the case for all outsider artists, all healthcare professionals, all curators, there are plenty of incidences where this isn't the case. But the reason I bring up this massive overview is that in the western history of madness within artistic production, so much of the contextualisation or explanation of the artwork is done by someone else. It is such a salient reminder that the terms of reality in a situation are always set by the person who holds the power.

So I guess this makes me wonder, as well, as tonally your works are never aggressively negative, they usually occupy these strange in between states of feeling that cannot be articulated. But I wonder if you position your practice as a whole, rather than the individual works, as some kind of protest to the dominant reality, and a protest to the historical negation of the realities and conceptions of the world held by neurodiverse people?

Today is a terrible day politically. I should probably acknowledge this, and say that I hope you are finding strength despite it.

Sending love

R x

DEC 15: MP - RJ

Hello to you!

Yes indeed, these are dark days politically - it felt so strange waking up the day after the election and hearing the news here in The Hague. A long distance punch in the stomach, and then gradually feeling quite numb and dislocated from it all. It feels odd to just continue installing the show despite such a catastrophic result and all these shapeless fears for the future. Hope you are surviving the fallout over there.

Thank you for your thoughtful and thought-provoking reply. Since the deadline for this conversation is tomorrow and this will be our last exchange I will try to be thorough!

I like your definition of prop vs sculpture. I think in the past I would have had a similar division in my work, but the distinction seems to have become more blurred or fluid over the last few years. I think the reason why I have clung onto so many of the props from my films is that they seemed to have the singularity you talk about in relation to sculptures, continuing to have an aura or some level of significance in relation to new work. It's only recently that I've begun showing these props alongside the films, so they fully transition into sculptures instead of props. In this exhibition there are two ex-props on show. One of these, a sort of ceramic lattice that appears in *Nine Nectarines*, has become newly interesting to me since I opened its crate to find that it has changed since the filming process. It was carried down a rocky gorge in Yorkshire and submerged in a waterfall, came out looking totally normal but now looks scratched and yellow, although in the scene it appears pristinely white, lit up under the water. I like the idea that the viewer would witness

this transformation, seeing first the scuffed up yellow lattice and later encountering it in a different way, blown up in the projection of the film. For some reason these objects seem to quite naturally hold their own as sculptures in a gallery setting. On the other hand, the objects that are attached to hunks of green screen or have other adaptations specifically for filming are, for me, fixed as props. As you suggest, it is only in the films that they come to life and perform as sculptures - also because they are often altered by coloured lighting or animated in post production. I sometimes think it's a shame - for example with the plaster organs I made for *Nine Nectarines*. They're such curious and satisfying objects that it seems a pity to confine them to a box.

The Goddess! Yes! Her transportation was quite comical - we had to give her this bright orange seatbelt to keep her upright in the crate, which made it look like she was in some kind of escape pod ready to be blasted into space! It is terrifying entrusting these objects into other people's hands, especially the more fragile small ceramics. I'm definitely feeling the role of a custodian right now - just herding objects from one position to the next, in and out of boxes and vans.

This distinction between different modes of working that you talk about is something I absolutely experience - like you, when I am low or out of sorts I can't write or articulate anything, but I have an almost physical need to do something with my hands. Making the Goddess was hard work and at times felt thankless but it kind of kept me alive for those hopeless months when everything seemed so empty and bleak. Just forming the clay bit by bit, even on the days when all I wanted to do was sleep. It's weird, even though visually I find her a bit wonky and absurd I have this very anthropomorphic fondness

towards her, like we are in it together, bonded by her protracted making process. I think that it's part of the reason why I have such a multidisciplinary practice - because there are different modes of production suited to different moods. I feel most comfortable when I have lots of different strains of making going on simultaneously, so I can choose the activity that suits me the best depending on what each day brings.

It can sometimes feel quite reckless, writing confessionally or making work about your own mental health, or mental health in general. I think that's why I respond to your work so strongly - it feels so brave and refreshing to hear someone talk directly and sometimes viscerally about these things. I think in my work the reference to mental health is slightly encoded and could be seen as less than confessional, in that it is only spoken of in riddles and song. But more and more I feel that it's important outside the work to be frank about my own connection to these issues, particularly about how it is to live with Bipolar. There's so much caricature and conjecture in the media about the condition. It makes me want to give a calmer and more balanced account of what it means to manage it - the importance of trying *not* to struggle with it, but instead to accept it as an integral part of you. Even if there will be weeks on end when all you can think about is killing yourself, that's just part of who you are, and if you can accept that as a symptom that is kind of meaningless you can ride it out until things get better. It definitely makes you appreciate the times when you feel happy or even just normal, but I also think it's important to realise how many people are dealing with variations of these thoughts and conditions, so that you don't feel alone when you are struggling. I do want my work to reflect this in some way - to underline the universality of these personal

conflicts and create a space where they are accepted and de-stigmatised.

It's interesting what you say about Outsider Artists, about the worth of their work being dependant on an external contextualisation of it. I recently went to see an exhibition of Outsider Art at The Hermitage in Amsterdam and there was a whole book you were given to carry around with full accounts of each artist's life, background and condition. It made me feel quite sad, also realising that most people going around the exhibition would spend a minute or less looking at the work and then five minutes reading about the artist's confinement in an asylum, etc. A kind of verbal voyeurism - and then where does that leave the work? Most of it was beautiful and fascinating in its own right but it did seem as if this curatorial framing was giving it weight or worth that might otherwise not have existed. Depressing to say so but I do agree with your observation about the dominant reality being set by those in power.

It makes me think of that Bonnie Camplin piece where she interviewed a group of people who had developed what could be considered unbalanced conspiracy complexes. Individually they might be seen as mentally unstable, but having been brought together the evidence they put forward supported each other's views to build a convincing case. She speaks very eloquently about the existence of a 'consensus reality', and the other realities that exist outside of it. This is something that really resonates with me, having experienced shifts in perception that expose you to a whole different reality underlying our own. I do think that my work as a whole is a protest, yes, or at least a form of resistance, against a dominant reality that isolates and divides people with neurological differences. A narrative that characterises us as weak

or ill, setting up a false and damaging expectation that we need to be cured so that we can conform to normative expectations and blend into consensus reality. The riddles in *Nine Nectarines* are all based on constructed realities such as currency, capitalism and language. These form the foundations of reality and seem so solid on the surface, but the minute you start to dig into them they unravel and become unstable and abstracted. I want my work to be a space in which the terms of these dominant realities are scrambled by shuffling and encoding them, creating room for the in between, inarticulable feelings that you describe. I feel very strongly that there should be room to explore the unknowable, the invisible, the intangible - and that art is a sort of ecosystem that allows these other worlds to germinate and take root, potentially spreading back out into the world at large.

Thank you for your intelligent and insightful emails this last month or two! It has been so helpful talking to you alongside the process of making and installing the show. It seems strange that it will be open this time next week - so much left to do and decide. So now I sign off for a sleepy Sunday evening, resting in preparation for the last week of install.

Sending much love back,

M x