

Bold Tendencies 2022 Q&A with Paloma Proudfoot

To start, could you give us a bit of background on yourself, such as where you studied, where you're currently based and some of your key interests as an artist?

I live and work in London, where I grew up. I studied my BA at Edinburgh College of Art (2014) and my MA at the Royal College of Art (2017). In my solo sculptural work I use mainly ceramics and clothes-making but lots of other materials too. I explore how identity is shaped by the bodies we inhabit and how these notions are formed in connection and contrast to others, both historically and in the present. In collaboration with Aniela Piasecka and the performance group Stasis I also create performances combining movement with my sculpture and clothes-making.

Your visual language is distinctive and complex, blending meticulous craftsmanship with a range of soft materials and the hard-edged rhythms of modern life. Who are some of your artistic heroes and heroines, and what key sources of inspiration are there in your work?

I think that contrast in my work comes from the fact that I'm often looking historically for inspiration, but then drawing connections or differences with the present. At the moment I'm interested in the Medieval relationship with death and how questions surrounding mortality were given greater prescience in the art of that era than in present day Western culture.

I recently saw the late Medieval fresco *The Triumph of Death* at the Palazzo Abatellis by an unknown artist, which depicts death riding on a horse through a crowd of different characters, with responses ranging from pain and fear to complete serenity or denial. It was inspiring to see a work that is incredibly macabre but demands your attention and contemplation through the different characters and humorous touches like a group of women at the side picking their nails.

A contemporary artist I really admire at the moment is Oreet Ashery, whose 'Revisiting Genesis' films and accompanying book *How We Die Is How We Live Only More So* have helped

me connect these historical references with contemporary attitudes to death, particularly the Capitalist exploitation of death through its related industries and how these influences have shaped my own experience of grief. In terms of that combination of softness and hard-edge you mention, I have also been looking at Fritz Kahn's infographics from the 1920s.

The human body has always been central to your practice. Either through formal references to fashion and anatomy, or through the use of soft materials such as hair, food and wax – all of which evoke it's shifting and processual nature. Why is the body so important in your work?

I'm interested in how our relationships with our bodies are intensely personal, functioning as carriers of individual experience, but also that our bodies rely on connection to one another. In a very literal way our bodies present open borders, merging with one another in the gases and microbial life that pass between us, but also through symbolic and cultural connections such as race, gender, class and associated dress codes. In both literal and symbolic ways I find it constantly inspiring that these connections go far beyond our lifetimes and connect us throughout history and into the future.

I'm interested in how we bridge these different perspectives of what it means to live in a body. I draw out the connections between historical, anatomical and contemporary cultural understandings of the body, which are often viewed separately to one another.

We inhabit many different bodies in one lifetime and live with this perpetual uncertainty and impermanence. I try to evoke some of that fragility or vulnerability in my work, either through delicate working of ceramic or combining it with less stable materials. One of the reasons I'm drawn to performance is that it opens up my work to forces of nerves, potential embarrassment and the unexpected. It also makes the bodily implications of my work more explicit and provides space for humour too.

In the past few years, your work has increasingly focused on its relationship with fashion. This can be seen in your solo work, such as your solo shows *A History of Scissors* (2019) and *Project for an Overcoat* (2021), but also your recent collaborative exhibitions in 2021, *Ensemble* with Aniela Piasecka and *Ferine* with Saelia Aparicio. Can you

tell us a bit more about your fascination with fashion, and how this has developed through different projects?

Before I got into ceramics I was mainly working with textiles and clothes-making, so even when I'm making in clay and other materials now, the methods of making and interests from that time have stuck with me.

I am fascinated by the transition from flat fabric pattern pieces to three-dimensional form, and the potential for these templates and the resulting clothes to function as a record of the bodily movement and change. Like anatomy, this potential is often ignored in favour of convenience, attempting to generalise bodies into gender, sizes and type. I'm interested in how the wearer plays up against these strictures or imposed ideas and makes clothing their own.

Clothes also present a visual language we work with everyday, communicating our allegiances and values, but can also make people feel misrepresented and are often dismissed as untrustworthy or superficial signifiers. It's these tensions and joys of clothing that I keep coming back to.

Following from this, collaboration is clearly of deep interest to you and your work - with further practices including "PROUDICK" - a shared artistic identity with Lindsey Medick - as well as joint projects with choreographer Aniela Piasecka and your performance group, Stasis. How do you find collaborating with other artists and why is it so integral to your work?

I find collaboration exciting as a way to push myself out of usual habits. My collaborators offer me a perspective outside of my own experience and question my assumed methods of making things, which encourages me to push myself more in my solo work too. They have skills in different mediums and knowledge, which I find exciting to learn from. I find so much satisfaction in working with people with a seemingly different perspective or background and finding a meeting point in the middle, however tough it might sometimes be. Outside of the work and most importantly, they are all my friends and have offered a huge amount of support and much needed pep talks. I am very lucky!

Your new commission for Bold Tendencies continues to look toward human form, albeit abstracted and placed in a

novel context for your work. Can you briefly describe the physical work and its different elements?

The structure is based on a Medieval *transi* tomb, which is a two-level structure that presents the effigy of the deceased as if asleep on its upper bier, whilst below they are depicted as their imagined decomposing corpse. In my own experience of seeing a dead body, I found that my attention to simple activities of eating, breathing and moving suddenly became sharpened. The stillness of the body next to me accentuated even the smallest motion, chill of a breeze through the window or belly gurgle. By abstracting the 'living' figures to emphasise the mechanical qualities with pipes and wire work, almost like a switch board or plumbing network, I wanted to convey that acknowledging the presence of death can accentuate the wonder in the mostly unnoticed internal choreography of the body at work. The fiery glazes of the 'living' appear to burn above, flowing towards the entwined 'dead' figures below. The dead figures are less abstracted and are without the flowing pipes of the living but continue to lie below them, continuing to feed both the plant fronds and earth that supports the living.

The *transi* tomb is a fascinating element. Can you describe a little more what these tombs are, their purpose and how you first came across them?

I started reading about *transi* tombs while researching another project into a Medieval Legend and the associated memento mori traditions of the time. They differ from earlier tombs of the period, which depicted an idealised corpse below rather than this more visceral version. They were designed to remind people of the fragility of life and to encourage a more pious way of living to ease the transition into the afterlife. *Transi* tombs were part of a wider Medieval cultural tradition of presenting death interacting with humanity. I was interested in how I could create a contemporary version of this, acknowledging the presence and importance of death in our contemporary lives but outside of a specifically Western Christian tradition and without the moral didacticism of the Medieval examples.

The figures that are shown in your piece are abstracted and intermingled, glazed in a beautiful mixture of colours. This approach stands different to typical tomb designs, with either singular figures or distinct couples. What led to this choice of design?

I wanted to convey the interconnectedness of bodies, by abstracting and merging the 'living' figures and having less distinction between the living and the dead. I was thinking about how my choices in life are shaped by those I love both living and lost, and that influence outlives us in memories of the living.

The title of your commission, *Grief is recognised as a friend*, is taken and skewed from the title of a Kathe Kollwitz drawing "Death is recognised as a friend". What was it that struck you about this artwork and title, and how do you think about your commission in relation to the programme theme of Love?

I saw Kathe Kollwitz's series of drawings entitled 'Death' series of drawings at the Kollwitz museum in Cologne. The series presents people greeted by a personified figure of death in different guises – as an act of violence, suddenly and unexpectedly, in loneliness, but also as a liberator. I was really taken by one of the drawings, *Death is recognised as a friend*, that shows a man gripping the face of death, whose back is to the viewer. The title made me think about what grief might look like if it was presented as a friend, acknowledged as an expression of love and allowed time for. In contemporary society, the slow and unending process of grief is at odds with Late Capitalist emphasis on productivity and work and so it is convenient to present grief as something to be feared and pushed to the side. I hope my piece might encourage some contemplation of the generative potential of grief instead.

What have you got planned for the rest of the year – are there any special projects in the pipeline?

I'm working on my first ceramic frieze for a show at Kunst im Tunnel in Düsseldorf and some more performance projects with Stasis, including a performance at Bergen Kunsthall.