



EMMA HART SPREAD





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*'I feel frustrated that visual art has so many limits on what you can and can't talk about. I can't really talk about my life, or feeling old, or my child's health. The visual arts are so achingly cool'**

I first saw Emma Hart's work in 2009. 'Chasing Animals' (2007–2010) was a strange and funny series of videos made while the artist ran after animals (including a peacock, sheep, geese and wild ponies). Each descended into a blur of landscape and animal accompanied by the sound of the wind and the artists' voice and breathing. I showed it to my fellow committee members at Outpost, Norwich, wondering what they would think. Subsequently Emma has shown in reputable galleries and festivals across the UK. She is clearly accepted as part of the British art scene. But her work still doesn't look like much else.

Emma makes sculptural installations with elements of video and sound. They surround, attack and absorb. Disembodied characters shout, cry, instruct and complain. She used to work in photography and video but talked about lenses and screens making a surface, a smooth covering over things that were jagged or lumpy. She tried to find ways of showing the bumps, the humps and the chunks. Now she works most frequently with ceramics. The work in 'Spread', at Art Exchange, University of Essex, takes form in wall-based ceramic sculptures that incorporate projection and photographic images. Further ceramics sit on benches and lie, abandoned on the floor. A sound piece, 'Radio Shame' (2015), plays from a domestic radio that sits on a ceramic tray complete with coffee stains in the corner of the room.

*'I've been called authentic twice this week. I think they mean I'm working class.'**

Class and gender are at the core of Emma's work which concerns bodies, problems, stress, anxiety, children, call centres, waiting, boredom, dinner trays, mouths, interior spaces conceptually and physically, pain, not feeling art-world, not reading the right things and not being interested in reading the right things. The work bears Emma's personal experiences; it is neither didactic and overbearing nor ironically distant. Her daughter has been ill in the run up to this show. 'Spread' embodies her anxieties, her experience of mothering an ill child, feeling embarrassed and having too much to do. Her feelings are *in* the work, they are not explored through a cool,

*Quotations are taken from *Radio Shame* (2015).

detached lens. Like her previous shows, 'Spread' explores sensations of anxiety and embarrassment. This new work is quieter, softer and more intimate.

The meeting of public and private is a constant refrain in Emma's work. She is interested in things that simultaneously inhabit the body's inside and outside spaces. Tongues were the main motif in 'Dirty Looks', at Camden Arts Centre in 2013. They appeared as napkin rings, rosettes, trowels and door handles. Tongues are amphibious organs, just as happy sitting in the watery interior of the mouth, extruding into the outside world or in a state of between-ness when licking, tasting and speaking. Sweaty armpits, tears and sick inhabited this interior/exterior position in 'Giving It All That' (2014), at the Folkestone Triennial. In 'Spread', hair pours out of anus-like scrunchies, a mixture of feces and sausage meat. A clenched ceramic hand covers a small projector that coughs, infecting audiences, walls and floor with images. Knickers cling to the crevice of a ceramic bum in the centre of the gallery.

Our bodies push coughs, sweat, tears and vomit into the world to demonstrate a sensorial or emotional reaction. Each of these is, like hair, formed within the body but only becomes articulated or existent on reaching its exterior. Emma's use of clay is corporeal, both in terms of outcomes and making process: traces of scratches and bite marks show an index of Emma's physical interaction with the material. In 'Spread' two sets of ceramics that

approximate sheets of A4 paper show images of skin pricked with sweat. Scratches in the ceramics look like grazed skin or armpit hair. The images pasted onto the ceramic planes form one layer of skin, the glaze forms another and these impermeable, polished surfaces contrast with the porousness of the biscuit-fired ceramics elsewhere in the show.

Eyes, hands and tongues are the body's key tools of communication. Each gives and takes information, acting as a portal between exterior and interior experiences, ideas and emotions. In 'Giving It All That' Emma used hands: hands serving drinks, hands holding clipboards, hands pawing at computers and images on screens. The arms in 'Spread' begin with severed edges and end in hands that clutch at missing bodies. Close to human scale, these arms appear as squeezed out tubes, their tips worked and pushed to a point of expiration. Full of the artist's tense anxiety they form hugging, bracing and crying gestures.

'This feels pretty risky and I feel pretty exposed making an artwork that has all these, feeling sorry for myself, little monologues in it.' *

Emma uses scripts to explore control, preparation and presentation and to discuss what *should* and what *should not* be said. In the two months before 'Spread' opened Emma started making an audio diary, recording herself talking into her phone while in Asda or on the bus. The recording is presented, unedited, as a



four-hour sound work, 'Radio Shame' (2015). At the opening Emma told me that she had recorded 'Radio Shame' in short snippets each day, never listening back. Here she was experiencing it for the first time with her audience. In it she talks of her anxieties about being working class, a mother, and an artist. She discusses the exposure she faces when making and the potential for humiliation when showing. By neither scripting nor editing this piece Emma cedes a certain amount of control.

Perhaps Emma's interest in scripting comes from her experience of working in a call centre, where workers are required to inhabit company scripts with a 'natural' voice. Or perhaps that has become part of Emma's narrative, rehearsed and reiterated by her and others. Her work rides on the tensions between rhetoric and accident, between the *should* and the *is*, between the public presentation of work and the artists' private misgivings. It talks of appropriateness and expectation. What should art be about? At Art Exchange Emma said to me, 'this show was supposed to be about photography and ceramics'. But she got side tracked. Now 'Spread' is about stress.

'I'm in Asda. There's been an almighty milk spill. It's really screwed up the traffic flow. I hope I can get out of here soon.' *

Emma's work uses visual spillages and slippages as well as verbal ones. Ceramic outlines of wine glasses chuck ceramic drinks again the gallery walls. These pools are simultaneously speech bubbles and



vomit that erupts from the mouth shapes Emma has bitten into the clay. The materials and sculptural forms walk a tight line between control and disarray. Spilt drinks and a projected cough disrupt an otherwise sedate hang. Clay sculptures of hair nod to tensions between liveness, looseness, control and stasis. Often seen as healthy, glamorous and feminine, long hair – which is actually formed of dead protein filaments – is the perfect material through which to speak of this tension. The hair in Emma’s work is held by oversized scrunchies that make a lame attempt at taming already static fired clay.

*‘How am I supposed to make an artwork, even when my art is about stress, when my daughter has gone on some kind of hunger strike? I don’t have anything in me to pull out other than concern for my daughter.’ **

The anguish and embarrassment in Emma’s work is powerful and awkward. Encountering her and her characters’ humiliation and angst in a public space, with other visitors, watched by an invigilator, is uncomfortable. In ‘Spread’ screwed up ceramic hands express tension and hurt. Emma’s untrained voice sings the wrong lyrics. The rawness of what she discusses in ‘Radio Shame’: her concerns over child care, the poverty of the area where she lives in London, her forthcoming show, and whether people like her, is heightened by the unpolished nature of the recording. The background noise and audio imperfections add a layer of authenticity.

Aside from the acceptable – trendy even – materials: clay, projectors, screens and MDF, Emma uses materials and objects that reference awkward bodily experiences. She has used metal bars, designed for the elderly or disabled, as sculptural supports for laptops playing videos; hooked Birros onto ceramic clipboards and fastened cheap plastic watches around elongated ceramic arms. In ‘Spread’ a pair of cheap knickers clings to an abstracted bum, clogging the meeting point between where an A4 photograph mounted on ceramic has been ripped apart. The inference here is that behind any photographic surface lurks the potential for quick satisfaction in the form of images of genitals or a cheap gag. These props reference uncomfortable bodies, cheap high street production values and humdrum office environments.

Emma asks you to listen to her talking, crying, laughing, singing and coughing, not in a sanitised Hollywood manner, but in an untrained, wavering voice suffused with a South London accent. Emma’s work reminds me of the colloquialism ‘spill your guts’. This visceral expression describes, with a violent physical metaphor, the process of making something known. It sounds painful and inappropriate. I wonder, is this how we see a discussion of emotions? Still?

Elinor Morgan



art exchange

