Prospect and Refuge Artist Q&A: Carl Anderson

David Surman: I have a couple of questions that I'd like to ask each artist in the show and then some more specific ones. The experience of artists has diversified greatly in recent years so it's always intriguing to get a sense of where and how they're working.

The exhibition is inspired by the ideas of Jay Appelton, particularly his observation that our ingrained comprehension of the landscape influences our aesthetic sense. Could you describe your journey to the studio or place in which you make your work, the place itself and your view from that place.

Carl Anderson: I recently moved to a commuter's town halfway between Brighton and London. I work from a shed that I've converted into an art studio at the back of the garden, similar to all of the garden offices that have sprouted up during the covid era. I like being able to jump back and forth between the studio and my home in what feels like just a few short steps. Adjacent to this studio is a smaller, more traditionally dank garden shed where my kiln lives, alongside garden tools and a general overflow of clutter. A small patio joins the two sheds, looking back at the house over shrubbery, wildflowers, and a small patch of artificial grass.

DS: Should a studio be a comforting place or an antagonistic zone with potential artistic hazards? Do you clear away obstructions to make a clear way toward opportunity or do you trap yourself in order to find new intensities?

CA: I used to work out of a cellar from a ground floor flat where I lived in Peckham when I first started working in clay. So what I have now feels far more practical and serious; I have stations for rolling out clay, hand-building, drying and glazing, and so on. Whereas before, it felt like I was fighting a very impractical space. I should have opted to work from the kitchen or the front room rather than a cellar in Peckham, but I'm not too fond of it when space for art and general living space feels too entangled. The basement was somewhere that felt shut-off entirely from the rest of the flat, and I didn't feel phased by the hazardous and low ceiling and overall dinginess of the space. And now, even though

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it's a studio at the end of a garden, my domestic world is separate from the art one.

DS: I was wondering how you came to work in ceramic as a sculptor. I read that you studied at the Architects Association, and now you're exhibiting these ambitious ceramic works for the last several years. How did you come to work in this particular medium?

CA: I went to the Architectural Association, but I dropped out after a year. I picked the course on a whim out of college, having not had much interest in architecture, but feeling like I had to go to university and not knowing what else to do (because art didn't seem like a viable career choice for me personally), so I just went for it. Though, I don't regret my time at the Architectural Association. It solidified this passion for materiality and its practical use for sculpture, which became more evident to me through the workshop modules. What followed was a kind of limbo where I wanted to keep making, but I didn't have a footing in any particular medium. I worked in a warehouse and bars and, on weekends, did short courses in glassblowing, welding, casting, and so on. I then did a foundation in art in Brighton (again, not focussed in ceramics at that point) and a few years later found my way to the Ceramic Co-op in New Cross. So it kind of feels like I've landed in ceramics purely by chance, and it's been a catalyst of my practice ever since.

DS: One of the things that is always outstanding about your ceramic sculptures is their technical accomplishment, from the construction to the glazes. I get the impression from looking at them that research is a big part of your studio practice, would that be correct?

CA: You have to get used to failure working in ceramics. From a technical standpoint, so much can go wrong, from construction faults to overfiring. Glazes, in particular, can animate or kill dead a piece. It can have a sealing, deadening effect on an object and turn it into an ornament or it can be striking and odd. So there is a kind of dialogue between object and glaze that must be won. I try to think about colour and beauty in the glaze but also strive for abjection, wobbliness, uncertainty and accident.

DS: You've recently been using imagery from armouries, and also traps and other menacing things. What interests you about these subjects, and what does it mean to you to meticulously create them in ceramic?

CA: The armour is rooted in a personal experience of violent trauma. It made me think of the very physical fact of having a vulnerable body and of the armour as totemic protection for it. Physical trauma is very hard to make art about because there's not a straightforward, realistic representation of it. It seems inadequate to the lived experience - both for myself and

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comparatively. At the same time, I want to extend this personal experience and make links through the sculptures to ideas about power, weakness and strength, punishment and masculinity.

The theorist Mikhail Bakhtin in Rabelais and his World is of particular interest as he writes about medieval carnival humour. It can contain both seriousness and laughter at once. It both ridicules and celebrates. It involves both the bodily grotesque and the cerebral and spiritual. I like how he doesn't seek to demean the subject of the joke, rather to liberate everyone involved in it. Clay, for me, has a similarly liberating quality from a seriousness that feels impossible to dilute in today's society.

DS: I've noticed that scale plays an important role in your work. With clay there are certain practical limitations, but it seems you'll make things subtly larger or smaller to achieve certain effects or sensations. I was wondering if you could talk about that?

CA: I want there to be a nice sort of laughter in my work. Given the ostensible purpose of the helmets and sabatons, the cartoon pointiness, bluntness, and fancy detail seem absurd. However, I try to extend this humour in how I make and model objects, giving them a particular feeling, irrespective of scale.

The modelling style of the bear trap and grass, for example, is rounded like a 3D cartoon. The cartoon style modelling of the subject is like Tom and Jerry violence: present but transformed by means of exaggeration and stylisation. Other times, like in Das Boot, there's a focus on the shaky sort of pencil drawing fragility in the modelling. The flow of modelling in the griffin head helmet adds a kind of fetish and sensuality. The detail and the process of making the rivets, overlapping metal links etc., on the armour makes me (and I hope the viewer) think that whoever made these objects (in medieval times) has enjoyed it. I find so much beauty in the pattern and form, and I want the pleasure to be visible and present in my artwork.

So, overall, scale is a part of it, but I think the clay projects a feeling I have toward the object and the pleasure/feeling I want to experience from it.

DS: Thank you for your time!