

## Emily Towler : Sculptor

Reviewer: Samantha Broadhead

Towler is a Leeds-based artist who is working with issues around gender and identity. In 2011 she achieved a *Kenneth Armitage Foundation Emerging Sculptor Award* and in 2012 was short listed for the *Woolgather Art Prize*. Her work combines humour, absurdity and playfulness in relation to sculptural and drawn works that raise some serious questions about how we 'fit into our skins' whilst living in a complex world.

*My work takes a tongue-in-cheek look at issues of identity and place using sculpture, drawing and performance. I am particularly interested in deconstructing notions of gender, class and heritage, often using my alter-ego, Mabel Milford, an absurdly over-exaggerated character who embodies outdated notions and expectations of womanhood, which may be less acutely felt, yet still pervade society today. (Towler, 2014)*



*Mabel, you are my doubts and self-loathing (2011)*

*Mabel, you are my doubts and self-loathing (2011)* is a visually arresting work that evokes a powerful uncanny response in the viewer. Is this a person; is this an object? (1) On further investigation the body can be seen to be a carefully crafted facsimile of the artist, but this knowledge does not dispense the shifting feelings of unease. Memories of the sculpture of a saint's corpse in *Santa Maria della Vittoria*, Rome, connect Towler's work to a wider tradition of presenting the prone body within casket-like structures designed to enhance the overall spectacle. As life-size fetishes these body/objects receive the viewer's guilt and fears of ambiguity.



Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

*Photograph: Sam Broadhead 2014*

*My work is an existentialist attempt to divide the who from the what, split the natural self from the adopted one, to understand the origins of identity in all its complexity, pick apart the internal conflicts that arise between the different modes of being, and investigate the liminal space between. (Towler, 2014)*

The work certainly calls to attention the boundaries between subject and object; life and death; art and the vernacular. A more playful and interactive expression of these ideas can be seen in the *Gender Binary Machine, 2014*. This comprises of a mechanism that requires the audience to participate by writing down their feelings about identity within a world that constructs gender through restrictive binary oppositions (for example, bureaucracy demands of us 'tick male or female' offering no other option)(2). The heavy machine is then carried on the back of the artist through the exhibition space, pressing down on the body; an unbearable burden that inhibits and stymies movement. Towler seeks to express her personal concerns in order to share and connect with other people's experiences. This approach can be seen as an example of issue-based art work that seeks to use the conventions of contemporary sculpture to test our own assumptions. Towler is mindful that whilst working in this territory she also needs to think about her ethical responsibility towards her audience, synthesising her sculptural practice with a social one.



*Gender Binary Machine, 2014*

A final example of Towler's work moves away from the sculptural into a dynamic drawing practice. The processes of drawing, erasing and redrawing act as metaphors of forming and reforming identity. What remains on the paper is a self-portrait that insistently constructs a unified image of self that has been traced from the remnants of previous drawing actions. This work seems to suggest that identity like the drawing is always 'a work in progress' and a sense of wholeness or coherence is often fleeting.



### Wash Away and Redraw (Recursive Portrait), 2009

Overall Towler's body of work can be seen as an artistic practice that responds to contemporary discourses about gender and identity. In sympathy with the theoretical work of people like Butler other possibilities are hinted at that lie outside a man/woman paradigm. The work under discussion concurs with Haraway's call '*for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction*'(3). Through creativity and innovation could we all have the potential to play with our gendered identities without fear and self-loathing?

- 1) Freud, S. *The Uncanny*. 1919. Translated by McLintock, D. London, 2003. p121.
- 2) Butler, J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London, 1999. p10.
- 3) Haraway, D. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York. 1991. p150.