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'The sculptures chew at space, blunder and bulge. I feel threatened'

Masked and slathered in hand sanitiser, our critic ponders new realities, proximity and space at the reopened gallery's sculpture show Crushed, Cast, Constructed

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'The lumpen shapes bear the imprints of the artist's fingers and palms' … Urs Fischer's Iz, Zizi and Miss Satin at the Gagosian gallery in London. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

Life during lockdown has meant that we have had to make our own amusements. How about some clay? We could model something. Or some old boxes to muck around with – we could build a hidey-hole, an obstacle course or a space ship. Or how about a truck, or some kind of tractor? We could go on a pretend drive around a make-believe farm. Look at the cows and the fields or take a nice splattery ride through the silage and the manure and send the chickens squawking. But, like a kid wanting a toy, I need a thing, a thing in person, the real thing. Preferably something that someone has made. A thing in space and me there with it, something I can relate to with my body as well as my eye.

Sitting quietly through lockdown untouched by anything but a feather duster, there are only five things in Gagosian's delayed sculpture show that opened last week for limited hours until the end of July. Everything is grey. Not exactly fun, is it? Fun times are over, but I'm more than up for it.

Masked-up as if I'm about to rob the stagecoach and slathered at the gallery entrance in hand sanitiser, I am counted in. The American painter, wit and aphorist Ad Reinhard once said that

sculpture was what you bump into when you back up to look at a painting. We know objects can hold a trace of the virus, but it isn't the sculpture that worries me, it is other people. Everything has an aura now, and not just the art. I think of Alberto Giacometti, all those sculpted figures, paintings and drawings with their invisible force-fields made visible and somehow tangible, that snare the space around them and draw us into their gravitational fields. Making proximity and distance their measure, they attract and resist us.

I would like to say how great it is to wander among artworks in a gallery once again, to encounter things made with purpose, things that were made before the current threat was apparent. But we see things in the here and now, whenever they were originally made, and here we are. A heightened awareness of the proximity and distance of others inevitably leads us to an amplified sense of spatial awareness, of our being bodies and minds in space and time, subject to gravity, to air currents, to light and shadow, as we calibrate safe distances and dangerous proximities, sniffing and sweating and breathing our shared air.

A definite psychological distancing takes place in front of the teetering, extruded and squeezed forms that lean and bulge over you in the room occupied by Urs Fischer's formless and vaguely cloacal aluminium cast forms. The Swiss artist likes playing with clay, all that atavistic squeezing, kneading and slopping about – the feel of its wetness and slipperiness, its squidgy baseness, its resistance and flow, its plasticity. Fischer's group of sculptures take these base lumps, all formed with the hand, as their starting point. Scanned and enlarged and finally cast in aluminium, these lumpen shapes tower almost to the ceiling, their surfaces bearing the imprints of the artist's fingers and palms, the haptic traces of fingerprints and creases also enlarged to scale. The last time I wrote about these sculptures, more than a decade ago, I was immune to them. Now I think they work best in a smaller space, as here. I also think I have changed.

There is a nice circularity in the fact that clay itself is formed from water and complex molecular networks of aluminium silicates. These sculptures' titles are taken from French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's 1874 Le Dernière Mode, a strange hybrid between art project and fashion magazine. Writing most of the articles under pseudonyms, Mallarmé's magazine invented as much as commented on the burgeoning French fashion industry. Fischer has used the pseudonyms Mallarmé took – Zizi, Ix and Miss Satin – as names as much as titles. These sculptures, then, are personages, of a sort. Sometimes bone-like – and recalling Henry Moore – or reminiscent of fossilised faeces or solidified lava, they are anything but the fictive fashion writers of Mallarmé's invention. Made between 2006 and 2008, Fischer's sculptures chew at space, blunder and bulge and withdraw as you move among them. Their intimacy feels threatening. They invade my space to a degree I might not have been so alive to before. Another fear is that someone else might suddenly appear at any moment, up close, too close, from around the corner.

I admit, I get nervous these days when I venture into the world, take a walk or a train or a bus; even in the most familiar places I am constantly calculating proximities between myself and others, and aware of the space that contains us and that we occupy, aware of airflows, surfaces, barriers, aware of funnelling and dispersal. I am sure I am not alone in this. I imagine the enlargement of Fischer's sculptures – which began as fist-sized gouts of soft clay – as solidified yet porous envelopes of space, within each of which the movements and turns of a human being, perhaps one wearing the voluminous fashions of the 1870s, is constantly being mapped and registered. This, surely, is going too far. I imagined it for an instant and then it was gone. We

must be careful what we project. These are, after all, lumps of recast clay with drag names, and none the worse for that.

Tractor, 2003-04, by Charles Ray at the Gagosian Gallery. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

A 1938 Cleveland Tractor Company farm tractor stands alone in an empty room. Its working days are over. One of the caterpillar tracks is incomplete and the radiator grille is hanging off. Various other vital parts appear to be missing. For a long time it stood rusting in a field, a plaything for kids to climb on or throw rocks at, till Charles Ray found it and removed it to his studio and took it apart.

Every component – every spring, every gasket, every grommet and every fuel pipe, every nut and every bolt – the entire assembly was taken apart, reduced to its components, which were then individually cast by hand before being reassembled.

The tractor sits alone in a room, going nowhere. It already had a second life as a rusted, cobwebby kid's plaything, a pretend tractor. Ray had the whole thing dismantled and even cast all the mechanics, including the crankshaft, hidden inside the tractor, before welding and screwing everything back in place. This is an anatomical replica of the insides as well as the outside. All his work is more complicated than it looks. Even Ray finds it more complex than he thought he might. At one point he almost retitled this Philosophical Object. It is a conundrum.

A galvanised steel box sits on another, shallower one, which sits on a third, white-painted box-like plinth. The larger box of the three has been twisted and crushed, like a cardboard box you'd crumple and crush to get it to fit into the recycling bin, rather than opening it up and folding it down. Sculptor John Chamberlain is best known as a sculptor of car-body parts, creasing and crushing them somewhat in the manner of abstract expressionism. But there's no colour here, only greyness, and rather than the hood of an old Chevy or a Pontiac, his chosen box here might once have been – I was told, uncertainly – a box minimalist sculptor Donald Judd had fabricated and which then, after Chamberlain had had his way with it, ended up in the collection of Cy Twombly.

All this adds a certain frisson to Chamberlain's 1967 sculpture. It also makes me think of Robert Rauschenberg's Erased de Kooning (De Kooning gave Rauschenberg a particularly hard-to-erase drawing but, to the delight of both artists, Rauschenberg managed to rub it out almost entirely) and, rather more distantly, Martin Creed's ball of A4 paper, an unlimited edition of a balled-up

piece of paper which, like Chamberlain's box, usually sits on a plinth. Like all the works here, Chamberlain's leads in all kinds of formal, historical, metaphorical directions. I think of certain folded steel works by Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza, I think of some Picasso cubist portraits. I see Chamberlain's sculpture as a bust on a plinth, a human head with all its sheerings and folds and compressed and hidden interiorities. And last of all I think of leaving the gallery wearing a cardboard box over my head, to protect me from the world.