



A Quiet Focus

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Sven Christian in conversation
with Walter Oltmann (18 August 2022)

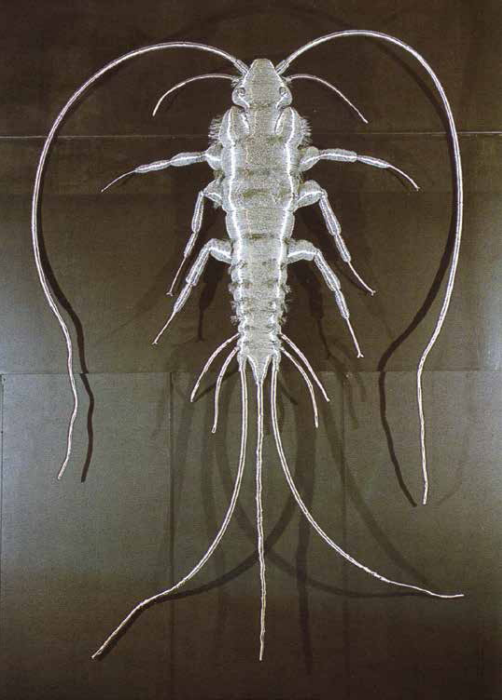


Walter Oltmann, *Chrysalis*, 2007, Anodised aluminium wire, 240 x 74 x 50 cm. Private collection. Photo: John Hodgkiss. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

Sven Christian [SC]: So the purpose of this chat is to talk about your practice and methodology, and to continue our conversations about the work you're planning to do at the Centre, so that we can continue developing the exhibitions and publication. When we first spoke, we discussed inviting different artists who work in a similar mode to talk with you about their methodology, as a way of thinking about how different artists employ similar techniques, but to varying ends. This idea stemmed from reading your thesis, "In the Weave" (2017), and your reading of material and process in the practices of artists like Andries Botha, Nicholas Hlobo, and Siemon Allen, in particular weaving / unweaving. One writer who comes up a lot is Tim Ingold: this idea of the 'ongoing generative movement' and of 'following the materials.' Maybe we can start there...

Walter Oltmann [WO]: When I started the PhD I had little idea where it would go. I began by trying to identify people whose work I was interested in. Anita Nettleton,

my supervisor, suggested that I jump in by describing what I do in my own art practice, and from there see how it feeds into discussions of other peoples' works. She suggested Ingold's writing, but it wasn't only him. I read a lot on craft. Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* was an important source and Glenn Adamson's writings were also influential. He writes a lot about contemporary craft and traces its origins in *Thinking Through Craft* (2007) and *The Invention of Craft* (2013). He also put together a comprehensive anthology of texts on craft in *The Craft Reader* (2010). Alfred Gell's book *Art and Agency* (1998) was also an important text to read. So to start, I read a lot of texts relating to making and materials, testing the water to see where it might go. Anita must have been quite frustrated initially, because my writing went in all sorts of directions. For my purposes, Ingold eventually seemed to be the most pertinent. He deals with the art of making, specifically as a weaving-based form of making. Then he discusses the 'ongoing generative movement' and that kind of thing.



LEFT: Walter Oltmann, *Silverfish*, 1997. Aluminium wire, 300 x 200 x 30 cm. Johannesburg Art Gallery. Photo: Bob Cnoops; RIGHT: Walter Oltmann, *Carpet Piece*, 1983. Galvanised steel wire and soapstone, 16 x 108 x 102 cm. Wits Art Museum collection. Photo: Mark Lewis. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery

SC: I'm interested in how this methodical, repetitive action — weaving — can be generative. There's also this sense in your work — in its reference to cocoons, exoskeletons, and so on — that nothing is ever quite as it is, or that everything is always in a process of becoming. Which isn't necessarily about growth. It could also be about the process of forgetting. How does this relate to the idea of 'following the materials'?

WO: My early student explorations in clay were about forming vessels — the idea of coiling and hand-building vessels. You follow forms, and that led to working with wire; to coil and create husks and hollow shapes that suggest themselves as cocoon forms — things that might be inhabited, or that morph and transform. Weaving in wire sparked an interest in creatures that do that, like insects in different stages of development. But as you saw in my writing, the very early works looked at wire gabion structures filled with rocks. Those were very different. I moved away from the very heavy, stone-filled forms towards weaving in wire in its own right, as a form of making that suggests itself.

SC: But even in those early works like *Carpet Piece* (1983), one can see the links to later works like *Silverfish* (1997), be it through its references to erosion or domesticity. Even though they're very different, there's a thread. There also seems to be a connection between those drawings you were showing me — *Husk I, II, and III* (2001) — of those bramble or thorn-like suits, those plants that stick to you.¹ They're not repulsive in the same way as silverfish, but they're annoying. They cling to you and are hard to brush off. At the same time, they're seeds. They "want" to be carried. So I'm quite drawn to thinking about your work in terms of labour. Particularly the kinds of labour described by Hannah Arendt — the labour of the body versus the work of the hand, but also labour as a metabolic or reproductive process. Birth, death, and so on. I'm wondering how this might relate to your process, in particular your work in wire?

WO: Wire for me has always been a very direct form of making. If I'd stuck to clay, I would've needed to invest in a kiln, glazing... There are all these steps. With wire you get a result very quickly. The forming process is

much more upfront. I can make decisions and change things as I go, so it's very process-driven: you make a bend and the bend is immediately captured in the wire. It then grows through successive layers of weaving, so the growth aspect is immediate. That attracted me. It's also why I find bronze a little foreign. I've played with it here and there on a small scale, but I'm still not sure. It's a bit like the clay thing. You have to go through certain processes after you've made something — the forming of the mould, the casting, and so on. Only then do you arrive at something. It's much more delayed.

SC: Is it the delay in result that gets you? Would you feel the same about printmaking, for example?

WO: Printmaking is a bit like the bronze casting in some ways. You draw something, then it has to go through certain stages. With etching, you then need to dip it into acid and see what that gives you, then carry on drawing on the plate... I'm not averse to that. It can be good to do something outside of your comfort zone, something that makes you think in stages. I actually enjoy the printmaking process because it takes me out of that immediacy of drawing and weaving. Bronze can do that too, but because it's very expensive, it feels less explorative, I suppose. You have to know in advance what you want to do. Even though I have an idea when I begin working with wire, the medium allows me to grow and change and evolve. There's much more fluidity for me in that way of working.

SC: So there's something about the premeditated aspect of bronze that feels limiting for you?

WO: It's just different. I didn't make those three drawings with the idea of making bronzes, but when I had them on my show, I spoke to Neil [Dundas] and said, 'You know, these actually

could become bronzes.' I'm not sure I will, but we'll see.

SC: Does the repetitive nature of your practice extend beyond the making of a single work? Like if you're working, there's obviously an acquired knowledge that comes with the process. It becomes like motor memory, but its translation from one work to another... I'm wondering if you think of your works individually, or if you view them as part of a larger whole?

WO: In a way, one work does lead to the next. For example, *Silverfish* sparked the *Carapax (Zygen)* (2021) sculpture that I had on my recent show. So I revisit certain things, feed off them, but also build on them, pushing the work into new terrain. I don't always know what I'm doing or where it might take me, but it's not so open-ended that I just allow the process to do its own thing. It was interesting to look at Chris Soal's work in that sense, because his abstract way of working with toothpicks seems quite open-ended. I still need to ask him about this, but I think he works with polyurethane foam. It's a substance that you mix chemically and it swells. So it's a fluid that you pour, and then it becomes a frothy form that flows along. That then becomes the substrate for his toothpicks to be inserted, I think. But that initial flow is a generative thing. It makes something that is not so controlled, which is somewhat different to what I do. For me, the weaving is a sequential, slow accretion which I control.

SC: I'm thinking about control now, specifically in your "figurative" works. They have a sentinel aspect to them, like those guards outside Buckingham Palace.

WO: Yes, and you need to have some sense of proportion to do that. I've often made a head thinking it will become a small figure, but then it's too large, so the scale of the whole shifts. It's intuitive, but you have to monitor where it's



Walter Oltmann, *Carapax (Zygen)*, 2021. Anodised aluminium wire, 230 x 140 x 38 cm. Photo: Anthea Pokroy. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

going and make adjustments accordingly. Very often things don't turn out how I imagined. Then I have to step back and say, 'Ok, do I need to cut this off entirely, or adjust the scale?' Those decisions happen in the flow as well.

SC: Are you a chess player, by any chance?

WO: No, not at all. [Laughs] Why?

SC: Well I feel that's how you play chess. There are certain moves you make. Then you realise that you've made a mistake and you have to adapt.

WO: Yes, I see what you mean. You have to step back and look and decide before you act...

SC: But at what point do you make the call to say that you're going to continue in one direction or backtrack?

WO: I don't normally unweave. It's a heck of a thing to try and undo something, so if a figure is going a bit awry, I either chop off a piece and carry on or I cut into the wire, pull it together, and stitch it. So there are some things I can do to adjust if it goes wrong, but yes, it's a bit risky, because you need to decide its scale and proportions at the outset. Those steps have to be anticipated and brought into the making, but it doesn't always go according to plan. It all depends on what you're making. With figures I have to be quite attentive to their proportions. With the wall pieces it's easier to pre-plan with a sketch on a big brown piece of paper. But those are more sketches than drawings, outlines of what I want to do, like templates.

SC: Do you often make drawings before you sculpt?

WO: Not normally. I might make a sketch of something to clarify what it might become, but I don't usually make a drawing and then decide that's what I want to do, except for this bronze thing. I tend to draw after the fact. I've made a sculpture and that might spark an idea for a drawing.

SC: At your house I noticed two legs — it looked like you were sculpting in sections, with the intent to stick them all together when you're done?

WO: When I do figures I usually start with the head. Well, the shoulders, then the head. I then weave from the shoulders down into the torso and into the legs. So it goes the other way around. I don't think I've ever started with the legs, strangely enough, but I could easily have done that. Somehow the forming of the torso allows me to develop the figure more easily. They're kind of suits, rather than figures. It's more like a skin around the figure; a suit that the figure can fit into. So it's not as detailed as a figure would be — I'm not weaving all the fingers and toes. But talking about limitations, I often find that wire tells me I can't do certain things. I was thinking of making one of these drawn seed-pod suits in wire, for example, and noticed very quickly that it wasn't going the way it should. The scale wasn't allowing me that kind of detail. If I were to make it much bigger it might. I made the bodice and then tried to weave those sharp, claw-like forms onto it. Then I realised that they needed to be much more robust, because I always need to work on the front, back, and sides. When you weave something on the front and turn it over, it has to lie on whatever you've done. If it's not sturdy it'll collapse. So it becomes very complicated to handle and it gets squashed

and doesn't quite do what you want it to do. I'd need to find other ways to stabilise it. So the wire has its limitations. It's not like bronze, which is hard. You can lie bronze on those claw bits. It won't damage them. But when you do that with wire it starts to bend and crumple.

SC: So has your thinking about the work you want to make as part of your award shifted from those brambly suits or seed pods?

WO: Yes. I made two smaller figures and thought I could use one of them to do something similar, by creating pockets where I could attach bristles, like I've done quite often. I'm going back to what I've done before, to see if I can bring in something new with that method. So I'm not crossing that idea off and saying never again. I just need to find a way of doing it better, maybe by increasing the scale. I'll have to see. When I think of that big space at the Centre, I want to create something that doesn't get swallowed up by it. I do have some works that are slightly taller than me, so they are quite big already, but maybe I need to think larger as well. Not enormous, but something that can hold its own in that space. I'm always drawn to artists who work in clay, and there are quite a few contemporary ceramicists who work large scale. Something about the unusually large scale for ceramics captures my attention, so looking at people like Jun Kaneko and Matt Wedel, an American. He does enormous works in clay, very colourful. So I'm trying to find a way into that kind of approach. I'm also imagining that people who come to see my work will also want to see work-in-progress, rather than just finished objects.

SC: It's notable that you're thinking about the space as constitutive of the work, to some extent. Not only in terms of what the work is, but its inside-out quality. I guess the space becomes really important. You mentioned an



Walter Oltmann, *Husk I - III*, 2001. Oil paint, gold foil and oil pastel on paper, 110 x 75 cm (each). Photo: Anthea Pokroy. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

alternative to making these thorn-type structures — from what I understand it sounds like they would function as clip-ons or adornments that you attach?

WO: Yes. It's a process of finding the right way into it; what will work, what won't. One artist whose works really fascinate me is Tony Cragg. His sculptures and drawings speak to each other. They're very fluid things, but quite large. They hold the space. Every time I look at them I get goosebumps. When he talks about his work, it's very much a process of figuring out where something will go. His work is mostly bronze-based, quite abstract, but there are figurative elements to them, hidden within the form. And quite a lot of the forms are perforated — they're solid forms, but sometimes they're hollow. I quite like the idea of the bronze as this hollow thing. Bronzes are hollow, even if they don't look like it. Some of Cragg's sculptures are very highly polished, like Anish Kapoor's large bean-shaped work in Chicago, which has a mirror-like surface. At other times he colours them, and there's a particular way of colouring bronzes that makes them these very bright, flashy things.

SC: What is it that attracts you to the hollow?

WO: Clearly, the hollow in my work comes from the weaving. But when I first realised that bronzes were just three millimetres thick, like hollow shells... I suppose I thought if I had to do a bronze it would have to show itself as being hollow. So these three figures, if I make them, would do that. The face would be empty.

SC: But why do you feel the need to show that it's hollow?

WO: Oh [Laughs]. That's a good question. I don't know. There's something about the fact that a bronze *is* hollow. When you see a traditional bronze sculpture, it doesn't show itself as hollow. It shows itself as a solid thing — very black, very dark, very imposing. Maybe the hollow says something about the process of it, the way it's made; that it's actually a skin-like thing. It's not completely filled out. I've always been attracted to things like that.

SC: I think there's also something to be said for vulnerability in this context; if something is hard and fast, if it presents itself as fact and doesn't



Walter Oltmann, *Caterpillar Suit II*, 2007. Aluminium wire, 120 x 110 x 68 cm, Private collection. Photo: John Hodgkiss. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

quite allow for doubt, it can feel like a bit of an affront.

WO: Yes. It also has to do with the fact that I've always worked with these husk-like things. The hollow, shell-like form is part of my language. But as you say, it suggests vulnerability.

An Antidote to Boredom

Usha Seejarim in conversation with
Walter Oltmann (9 October 2022)

Walter Oltmann [WO]: I'm interested in the transformation of materials through time in your work, what motivates repetition, and the constraints and importance of materials in allowing (or not allowing) you to do certain things. So I'll jump right in and ask about the objects and materials that you use, which are very mundane household items — brooms, mops, clothes-pegs, irons. All refer to repetitive activities around the home, like cooking and cleaning and ironing and sweeping. Where did this start? Was it something that you worked with as a student?

Usha Seejarim [US]: It wasn't a conscious decision to focus on the domestic. As a student I was interested in routine, the things that we do everyday. At the time I travelled daily by bus and taxi from Lenasia to Johannesburg. I made a number of works around that journey. I collected bus tickets to make a collage. I recorded the shadows on the side of the road. The rearview mirror on my old car didn't fit into its slot properly, so at night, when my husband was driving, the mirror used to rattle — I made a work that is now in the Iziko collection, where the car lights kind of dance. So there were various ways of documenting this journey. I also became aware that the first thing one does when one wakes up is brush one's teeth, so I made a video where I brushed my teeth for two hours. It was this routine that interested me.

Without realising it, I then shifted to the domestic. In retrospect, I realise that this happened after I had children. My life had become so domesticated and my routines changed. Suddenly I was doing a lot of ironing and laundry. But it wasn't a thing to say, 'Oh, now I need to make work about this.' The process of being pregnant, giving birth, becoming a mother — I think it was inevitable that I became aware of what it means to be a woman and the challenges involved. I suddenly had to pay attention to the domestic space. I couldn't ignore it. So it wasn't conscious, but my environment had shifted so much. Now it's much more

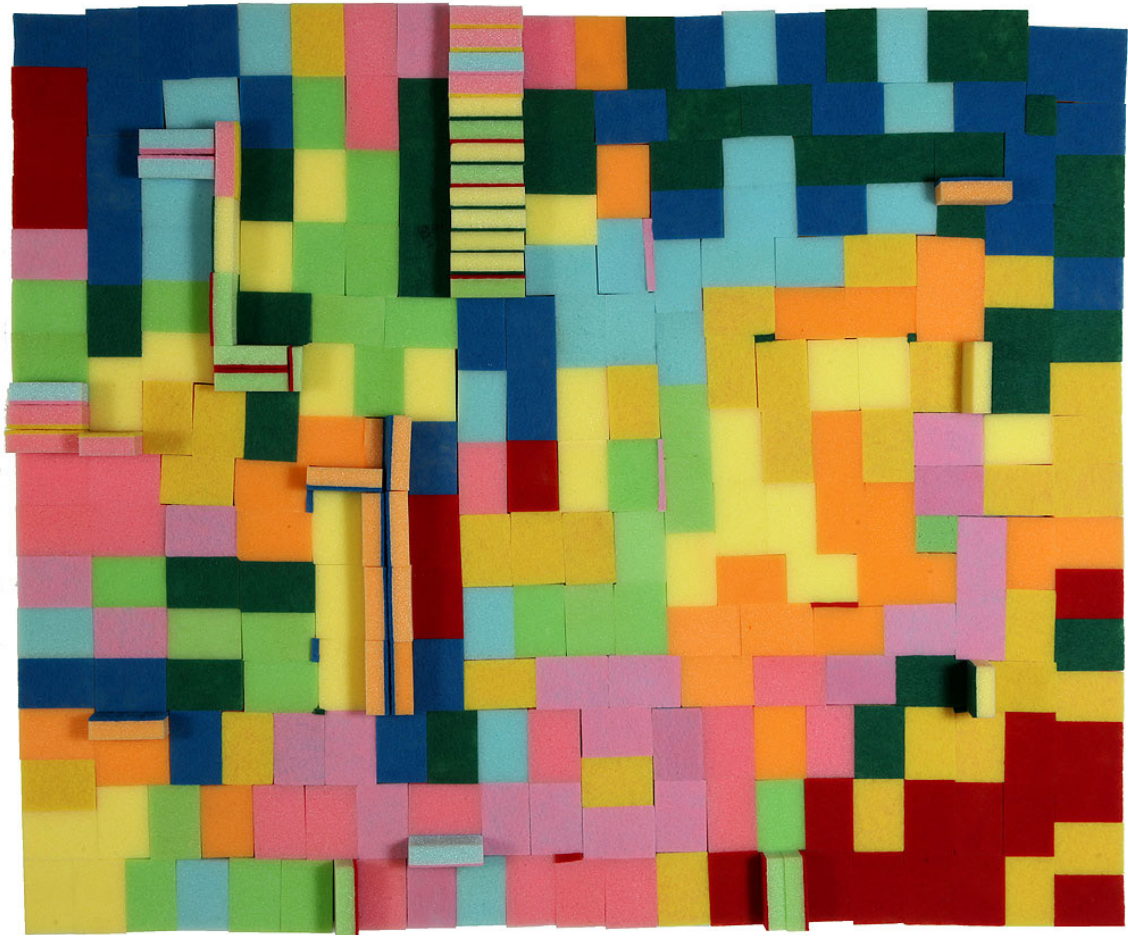
conscious. I know more about, and am attracted to, the materials I use, so I've started to think about what it means and so on. I think I cheat a bit, too, because these materials are already so loaded. Half my work is already done.

WO: Your materials are really found objects, but I wonder how you collect these things, because you use them in such huge quantities. Where do you get so many clothes-pegs and irons?

US: Initially I relied on contributions. It was wonderful. I would put out a call to friends and family on social media, to say I need your broken irons or broom-handles, and it was great because people were excited to contribute. In 2012 I had a travelling show called *Venus at Home*. It showed at the National Arts Festival, and eventually at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG). A lot of people had contributed, particularly my mom's friends and neighbours from Lenasia. They came to the show and were like, 'That's my broom! That's my mop!' [Laughs] They were identifying all their stuff. It was great. But now I use these objects on such a mass level that I have to buy them. I'm currently working with these vintage irons, that I buy per ton from a metal recycling place.

WO: From the get go, it's clear that your work is located in social interaction, social ritual. Your objects or materials are things that we're used to handling, so they have haptic qualities that encapsulate us, but it's what you do with them that creates an interesting tension, by making something unexpected out of the very ordinary. It's as if you're calling attention to the value in the ordinary, but there's also this absurd disparity in spending so much time manipulating these things.

US: I love that. I love the absurdity of it. But for me, it's also very important to bridge the gap between my art and the world at large. The art world is often inaccessible to the ordinary person. I'm the first artist in our family. Until



Usha Seejarim, *Dish washing delight*, 2015. Scouring pads on board, 150 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.

now, I don't think my mother really understood what I do. I was schooled during apartheid and still, public schools don't have proper arts education. A lot of family who come to my exhibitions aren't art literate. They don't understand the nuances of a reference to a particular art historical figure or work. So for me, these objects also provide an access point. And it doesn't matter if you don't know all of the references. This piece [*Dish washing delight*, 2015], for example, is made from scourers...

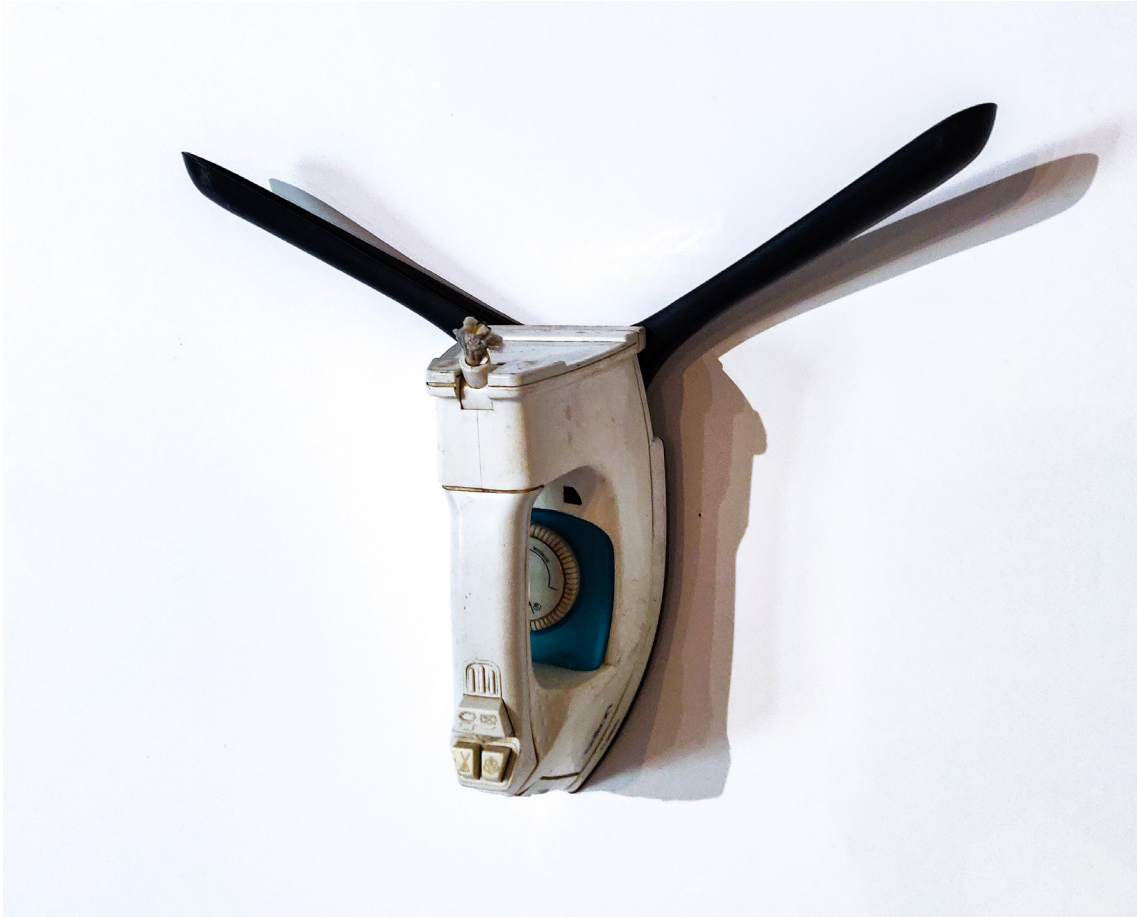
WO: Oh, yes. It's like a Mondrian.

US: Exactly. My aunt doesn't know what a Mondrian is, but she recognises the scourers and can appreciate the colours, so she can still access the work, which is important to me. Then there's the question of excess — the

obsessive fixation with this object and the process and labour involved. The labour is important because the work is about labour. It's about the drudgery of life — a commitment to it.

WO: It's also this thing of remanufacturing manufactured material, dislodging it from its normal routine. In terms of process, I was wondering if altering the purpose of this ordinary object triggers something for you, which you then allow to develop?

US: Over the years I've focussed less on my mind and more on my gut. I don't know if it's because I have worked with these materials for so long, but I'm more and more dependent on my intuition, allowing it to guide what happens. Previously I would think a lot, and research a lot, and be clever about the work.



Usha Seejarim, *Cow's Head*, 2012. Mixed media installation with iron and hanger, 51 x 16 x 41 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.

Now it's about responding to these objects, spending time with them. I know it sounds silly, but to actually listen, like, 'Tell me what you want? I'm listening.'

WO: Yes, it's like the material leads you. The repeated gestures in your artworks involve various simple handcraft actions of stacking, bundling, tying, knotting — in other words, very hands on methods of exploring directly and problem solving along the way. One can see that it involves a very physical engagement, sometimes even a battle, with the material. I'm trying to imagine trying to undo a steam iron. It must be challenging.

US: All the materials go through a rigorous process of deconstruction, cleaning, bending, hammering, fixing. The irons I'm working with now need to get scrubbed clean with a wire

brush and degreased. Then it gets all prettied up again. I made a series of works that I called 'Trophy Wives,' with the bases of irons that are cut with an angle grinder, then bent and beaten into shape. I became aware of the violence that the process involves. But on a superficial level, it's also about taking as much as I can from this. Like, there are several parts to the iron — the outer shell, the inside — and I use all of them. But maybe it's also about unpacking what's inside. To understand what it can be, I suppose. And where it goes. And to go deep.

WO: A lot of your work does involve this stripping down or undoing. There's this repurposing of things, but you also seem quite interested in the imperfect or messy or disorderly, as much as you are with the orderly making of things.

US: Yes, I embrace that. Sometimes I'm fixated on wanting to get something to do a particular thing. Often it just doesn't want to do that, and I have to accept that, even though it might take me a while to recognise that something else can happen, because I'm so fixated on getting it to do this one thing... Again, it's about listening, about being attentive, about seeing potential where you didn't expect to. And in working with the material, you also learn more about what it means, conceptually. The theory keeps developing as I work. It gets unpacked in the same way as the materials do.

WO: But there are also moments in your work where you reveal tears or ruptures, as in *Aperture of Concealed Desires* (2019). There's a little spot where the wires are untangling, like a moment of disruption or craft gone wrong.

US: I like that, it's going to be a good title for another work — "Craft Gone Wrong." [Laughs]

WO: I was wondering about that purposeful dislodging, though. What were you thinking there?

US: It's just embracing the mistakes, the imperfections. I've recently discovered that some of the work is very tight, aesthetically, and I want to allow for the unexpected. To free it up a bit.

WO: Your focus on the mundane or everyday, the repetitions and routines that take place within the home —regularity, monotony... Would you say that repetition is a kind of purposeful engagement with boredom, and do you find something liberating in this?

US: I've never thought about it in terms of boredom, because I find the repetition quite fulfilling. Or insightful. Or meditative. It's not boring for me at all.

WO: The boredom is referenced in the objects, though, what we associate them with. Perhaps your work is like an antidote to that?

US: That's another title, "Antidote To Boredom." [Laughs] But also, Walter, like I love building puzzles. Three-thousand, five-thousand piece puzzles. My family finds it very boring. I'll spend hours trying to find the right piece, and there's a sense of complete exhilaration after three hours when one piece fits in. It's the same with my work. We use thousands of nuts and bolts to put these irons together, but there are moments of, 'Ja, this is it!' You know? 'It fits!' I know this is you asking me, but your work is equally repetitive. You work with the same material, and it's a repetitive act. It's equally hands on, but how do you deal with that notion of repetition and boredom?

WO: I also don't really see it as boring. It's like a drive. The repetition makes the work go forward, but not in a mechanical way. It's not like I'm not there, in my own mind. I'm always focused. So there's always the thing of making, looking back at what you've done, and then forward in an anticipatory way. But I suppose there is a kind of monotony involved, a rhythm.

US: In the making and in that rhythm is a strong sense of presence. You get into a zone. That's why it's the opposite of boredom, and why it's about allowing one's intuition to take over, because you are so present. In a way that monotony allows for that presence.

WO: And there's always this thinking process within it. As you were saying, you think, you theorise. It all goes into it. There's this famous quote by the musician John Cage, who said: 'If something is boring after two minutes, try doing it four times. If it's still boring, then try eight. Then sixteen, then thirty-two, and eventually you'll discover that it's not boring at all.' You have to go beyond a certain threshold in order for something to become



Usha Seejirir, *Her Latent Power Lies Dormant*, 2019, Grass brooms and wire, 196 x 127 x 53 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.



special. Only then can repetition lead to variety.

US: I saw an interview with Samson Mnisi, who passed away recently. He was asked about his advice to younger artists, and I know from experience that when young artists would come to him and say, 'Can you give me advice?', he would respond, 'Let me see what your work looks like.' And he would look and say, 'Come back next week with ten works.' Eighty-percent of them didn't come back, but when twenty-percent of them did he'd say, 'Ok, in two weeks time come back with thirty, or fifty.' That was his process. He was so prolific, but it's through that making and making and making that something happens.

WO: You've already pointed to your explorations in video, which is clearly a durational medium, so time and duration seem very important in your work. And I think an important aspect about repetitive crafting is that a viewer can see the endurance and commitment that goes into it. I'm often asked how long it took me to make something, and I'm sure you are too.

US: I haven't made too many videos. I made one about two years ago and it's something I want to explore more, but what I enjoy about video is that element of time. It's there in sculptural or installation work, but video allows you to play with it more. It's not like colour or sound. Time is an element that, for me, is much more elusive.

WO: The immersive scale of your work and its multi-sensory qualities are another point of connection for viewers. Speaking about one of your broom installations, for example, you mention being able to smell the grass. So the smell becomes part of the experience. I was wondering about how you decide on scale. Is it determined by the process? Do you make decisions on scale whilst working?

US: I have a huge attraction to scale. I think it comes from being a student, when I used to do a lot of murals during the holidays. Again, it's about access. Making public art has a completely different dynamic to gallery work. The gallery is a very limited space, not because you have to pay to get in, but because lots of people don't feel comfortable. They don't feel like they understand the work, and it doesn't make them feel clever. Whereas artwork in public space is there to engage the public. Whether they like it or not, the work is there. As you know, I've done lots of teaching and grassroots work, so for me public engagement is important. Sometimes it's participatory, sometimes it's interactive, but in a public space the work has to be big, because there's so much that you're competing with. I just made a work at Burning Man which weighs forty tons. We needed cranes and forklifts and heavy equipment to move it, but there's something so exciting about that.

WO: Yes, large-scale public art is a different kettle of fish. Working on a huge scale is completely different to working quietly in one's studio.

US: Sometimes, if I want something at a certain angle and it's not possible, the engineer will make a suggestion that I haven't considered, which is not part of the aesthetic I want. And it's about this negotiation: how much do I hold onto, how much am I willing to negotiate, how willing am I to collaborate? I like those negotiations, because it's good to not be so comfortable.

WO: Absolutely. Things that push one out of one's comfort zone are important. Working in a different medium can make one think along different lines. It can push you out of your normal routine, your normal rhythm. But to return to these visceral qualities of touch and smell, what do you see them contributing in your work?

US: When I'm working I'm aware of these things — the smell of the grass — and I want the viewer to have that same multi-sensory experience. The work that you mentioned was at the Centre for the Less Good Idea. I had brought these broom heads on mass. The minute I opened the packet there was this smell of grass. It was so overpowering. Smell, in particular, is such a strong sense. I was four years old when my dad died. His brother, my uncle, is the closest connection that I have to him. And my dad used to smoke a pipe. He smoked a particular tobacco. I recently visited my uncle, who was sick, and got a whiff of this tobacco. At the time I couldn't make the connection. It was only after that I remembered that this was my father's tobacco. But I'm forty-eight next month. My father died forty-four years ago, and I can still recognise that scent. That's how powerful smell is.

WO: It also reminds me of the kinds of compression one finds in your work — it has this intensive quality, in terms of the form and the time that goes into it. And I think handcrafted work very often leads to this accumulated, condensed form, where the process shows itself condensed in the finished product. It's certainly true of your clothes-peg fields, for example, but also the broom works, which are often clustered into groups. There's an almost ritualistic aspect about the bundling.

US: Working with these objects in multiples, it's about how you put them together, and what becomes of them. The peg is recognisable, but when you put lots of them together they become something else. By itself the peg is quite rigid, but when you join them together they soften. They're skin like. I can bend and



Usha Seejarim, *Aperture of concealed desires*, 2019. Pegs and wire, 172 x 86 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.

curl them. A peg by itself can't do that, but as a multiple it can. So it's about exploring what they can be when they're together. In the same way that a thread on its own is very different to cloth. Cloth is magic.

WO: You were talking about puzzles earlier, and I know that at a certain point everything starts to fit into place and the process speeds up. Eventually there are only so many pieces left and you can pop them in quite easily. I was wondering about those larger condensed works — if you work from one side to the other, or if it's sporadic?

US: You have to plan how you do it with those works. I join them together into rows. They're stuck with wood glue, then I layer them and put wires all the way through, so each line has a wire, and they're joined on the ends. If I'm making something specific I have to plan it by saying, 'Ok, we need so many rows like this. This is what our width is, this is our length.' But in the process of making another idea comes through, which sparks an idea to take it further in another piece.

WO: Anthropologist Alfred Gell wrote an essay titled "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology" (1992) in which he talks about repetitive making, and how it can have a confounding effect by momentarily disturbing habits and conventions. He tells a story about how his parents took him to go see the Salisbury Cathedral as a child. In one of the side chapels was this model that someone made of the cathedral, using only matchsticks and glue, and how he was completely enthralled by this little model; that someone had taken the time to use such ordinary materials to make something so spectacular. It was more impressive to him than the cathedral itself. What I took from that is how technical processes can cast a spell over us, so that we see the world in an enchanted way. This idea of the spell and of magic comes through quite strongly in your work. In some instances, such as your broom works, you evoke it quite directly.



Usha Seejarim, *Mistress of Obstacles*, 2019. Pegs and wire, 64.5 x 21.5 x 19 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.

US: The broom was a catalyst for that train of thinking, but I also read an article in *The Guardian*, referring to Michelle Obama as a powerful woman. It talks about how, when women transgress sexuality they're labelled whores, and when women transgress power they're labelled witches. I thought about this aspect of power, and what it means for my exhibition *Transgressing Power* (2019). It included a work called *Mistress of Obstacles* (2019), about Vinyaki, who is essentially the female Ganesh. He's well represented. Ganesh is invoked to bless any ceremony, from the birth of a child, the death of a person or a wedding, to blessing your car or your house. You always do a Ganesh prayer first. Despite going to Gujarati school and studying the folk stories my grandmother used to tell us, I never knew about Vinyaki. And Ganesh is the remover of obstacles. That's why you invoke him before anything. But Vinyaki is the mistress of obstacles. Like, what the fuck? You



Usha Seejarim, *She Sleeps Naked* [Title quoted from *The Witch* by Elizabeth Willis, 2011], 2018. Found objects, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.

know! Why is she not well documented, why hasn't she been given her light? It's a thing of power for me — this unacknowledged or untapped power. With that show, I made quite literal references in some of the works, but it's something that I'm wanting to get much deeper into.

WO: That idea of destructive power is also very interesting. When I look at your brooms, and they're all chopped up, I'm immediately reminded of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (based on a poem by Goethe); the scenario of the broom that gets chopped up and the situation just gets worse and worse and worse. Violence, threat, and destruction seem

embedded in the work. But this underlying element of magic and power also suggests that your artworks are kind of fetishistic objects. There's something fetishistic about them; as objects of seduction and power, the animation of raw material.

US: I think there's an alchemy in the process of making.

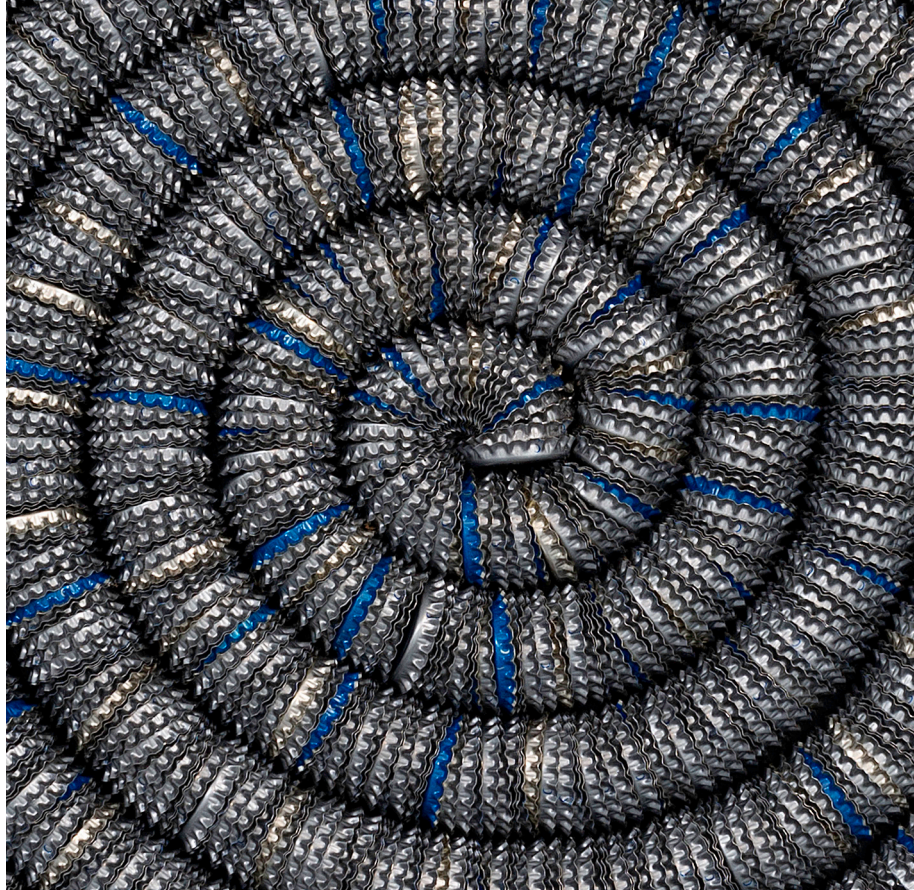
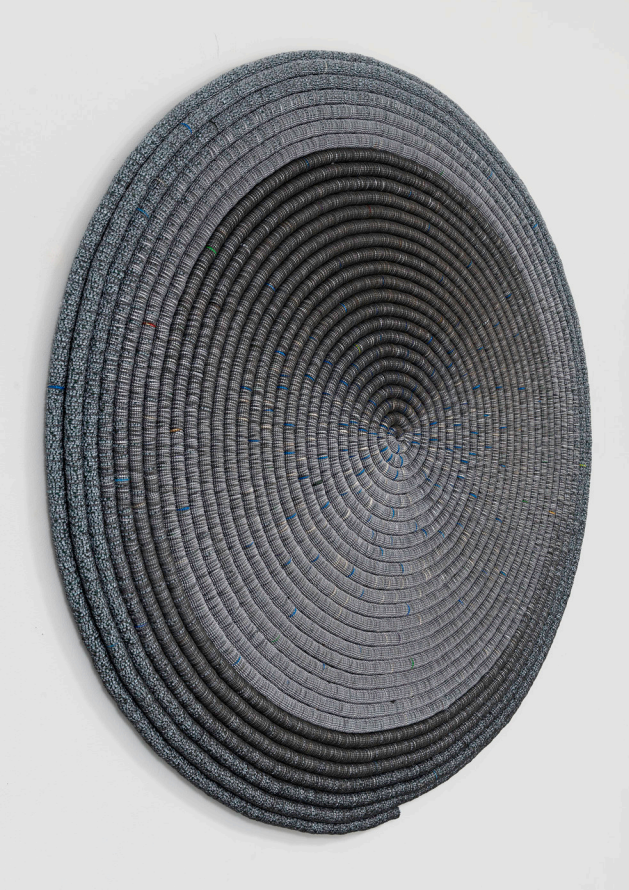
WO: The transformation of ordinary objects from the domestic sphere into an aesthetic gallery context also seems to have a fetishising impulse, a la Marcel Duchamp. In *Strange Cargo*, Ashraf Jamal writes about the role of abstraction in your work — about

what something is when it stops being what it is — and that this removal from the everyday is a kind of liberation. What are your thoughts about abstraction and the idea of the liberation of ordinary objects?

US: The precursor to that is where you said the work is elevated, you know? Out of the ordinary. So ja, I think there is so much attention to this object. You can't ignore it. Whether they're multiple or monumentalised or just cleaned up and put on a pedestal... I'm drawn to stop and assess this role of women as domestic beings; that it is not something that should go unnoticed.

The Dance

Chris Soal in conversation with
Walter Oltmann (23 September 2022)



THIS PAGE / PREVIOUS PAGE: Chris Soal, *Lost in Place*, 2021. Found beer bottle tops onto woven steel rope, secured with polyurethane sealant on board, 178 cm (d). Courtesy of the artist and WHATIFTHEWORLD.

Chris Soal [CS]: Hi Walter, how are you?

Walter Oltmann [WO]: I'm fine, thank you, and thanks so much for agreeing to participate in this conversation.

CS: It's a real pleasure. I couldn't be happier. I feel like it's a beautiful full-circle moment, from our discussions in the basement of Wits to here.

WO: So the purpose of the chat is to get some idea of how you engage with your materials, through slow repetitive making, and how this process leads to the forms that you make. As you say, the last time that we met was at your basement studio at Wits. It was just around the corner from my office. I think you were in your third year, and I was in my last year of teaching. At one point I had to step in as your tutor. I recall the bags full of bottle tops in your studio, and that quite a few people were already involved in the collection process. I remember the amount of preparatory work involved in the flattening of those bottle tops.

You weren't using a hammer, were you, but some sort of mechanical device?

CS: My starting point with that body of work was an interest in the bent form of the bottle top, and its resemblance to the cowrie shell. I have fond memories of picking them up on the beach with my family in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. It became this family tradition to see who could find the largest and most beautiful shell. Back then, my father told us about how it was used as a form of currency in precolonial trade, and its significance in relation to spirituality. All of these lingering thoughts came up. I also remember fiddling with those tops as a social tick, while having drinks with friends. That was the impulse. So I began collecting them *en masse*, and roping people in to help me collect them — bartenders or restaurant owners who I'd struck up a friendship with. Eventually the bending got hard on the hands, so I coated pliers in masking tape. That's where it began. Realising the extent of the task, a friend who had time on his hands offered

to help and we started working together. He would help me press them, using the drill press at Wits. We didn't use it for drilling, but put a sharp end on it and actually pressed the holes with that. Eventually, we built our own presses, which are still functional.

WO: One can see the joining in those works, the looping of a piece of wire, but then there's this other invisible dimension — the preparatory labour — that one isn't aware of when you see the work.

CS: There are also other invisible layers which I find interesting. At one point I could almost pinpoint where these tops came from, even though I was just receiving plastic packets from bar owners. I would drive around Jozi, pick them all up, and bring them to the studio. I'd forget which came from where, but as soon as I opened the packet I could tell, because alcohol brands are also socio-economic signifiers. You wouldn't find people drinking expensive non-alcoholic beers like Windhoek Zero, with its bright blue cap, in a relatively poor area. So if I found those I knew they came from a bar in a wealthier area like Parktown. I centred on the use of gold coloured bottle tops, primarily because it was the colour used and produced the most by brands like Black Label, Lion Lager, Castle, or Amstel. I found it interesting that these brands and many others selectively use gold as a colour to entice consumers, through the play on value association, and that in turn developed my thinking about their presence in the space: they became a vehicle to express my interest in Johannesburg's mining legacy.

WO: The flat disc and metallic nature of those tops also suggests coins, a currency. One is inevitably reminded of El Anatsui, who speaks about how these bottle tops are marked by human touch. I think it's the same with your work, and this notion of circulation. These objects are always on the move.

CS: Yes, definitely. Anatsui is a touchpoint for that body of work, and hopefully I've

managed to push the material into a territory of its own, despite his prolific presence there.

WO: I wasn't familiar with the toothpick works at that time. Can you talk about the process of making those. I understand that bottle tops are quite accessible, but I don't know how you would get hold of so many toothpicks?

CS: I tried to collect toothpicks for quite a long time, from bars and restaurants, with very little success. The idea was to make a piece behind perspex and encourage mould to grow, to see what kind of bizarre things might emerge. I wanted to tap into the fact that these toothpicks, these little slivers of wood, go into all of these unseen places. There was something about reaching into those spaces and pulling out the muck that I quite like, but I haven't fulfilled that idea. I've just been purchasing them from suppliers. We buy in bulk now, shipping them in from China. There's a big Birchwood region that runs from Europe across to China. And bamboo also grows very well in that region.

The idea started at a dinner party, when I saw a box of toothpicks on the table. It was arranged in this beautiful swirling pattern. At the time I was working on this large-scale iris, using bent bottle tops. I was thinking about how cowrie shells are often placed on the eyes of statues, and this relationship between seeing and perception; how we don't really see bottle tops, in the same way that we don't see toothpicks. They're so prevalent that we almost block them out. So I used the colour palette of the bottle tops to produce this large-scale iris, starting from the centre out, which inevitably created these Fibonacci spirals. You see the same effect in sunflowers. At the time I was attuned to that form, and I saw this array of toothpicks and took a photo. I sat on that photo for about two years. I thought it was cute, and I ended that thought there. I had to overcome my own bias, in terms of the material, before I took it seriously enough to do something. When I did try I was very imposing. I wanted to take that swirl and



Chris Soal, detail of *Mother*, 2021. Bamboo and Birchwood toothpicks, held in polyurethane sealant on ripstop fabric and board, 400 x 270 x 35 cm. Photo: Matthew Bradley. Courtesy of the artist and WHATIFTHEWORLD.

expand it on a larger scale. I started small — 30 x 30 centimetres in a small frame. I quickly discovered that imposing my agenda wasn't possible with this material. I had to surrender to it, and work more collaboratively with it, to see how the toothpicks fell of their own accord; how I could help them in their fall or suggest a different direction. The adhesive we were using is a very thick, viscous polyurethane sealant, which gave me a lot of time to work alongside the material.

WO: I've had very little experience with polyurethane. It's something that gets used a lot by taxidermists.

CS: Oh wow, I had no idea.

WO: Yes, you mix two bottles and it creates this foam, but I don't know if it's the same as what you use?

CS: I know what you're referring to. I've been interested in it for a while, but I've never used it. I use something like a polyurethane sealant, which has the same chemical compound base, but the outcome is very different. It's like a silicone.

WO: It doesn't froth up?

CS: No, you squeeze it out of a tube. That gives me a rubbery, flexible finish, without the acidity of the silicone.

WO: Oh, ok. Taxidermists make fibreglass moulds into which they pump the polyurethane. It swells up into the form and that gives them the positive of the animal that they then cover with the skin and the fur.

CS: That's a brilliant link that I hadn't considered. Because people see many different forms in these toothpick works, but the

reference to animal skin — the pelt or the fur — is something that I've played with a lot.

WO: It has a polystyrene feel to it, so it would be quite easy for you to use, to create these undulations. But I'm interested in your process. How do you then direct the flow of this material? How do you go about making them, because I see you use board and something like canvas, and then this glue... Do you first use the canvas and the glue, and then put it on a board, or do you cut out a template?

CS: The short answer is that the micro influences the macro form. So what happens on a small scale really dictates the composition and external form of the work. When I was discovering the material, I didn't want the toothpicks to fall into the glue. I thought I needed to support them, so I worked with these frames. I thought I could start on the outside by propping them up and then work my way in, so that they prevented the fall into the glue base. As I worked, I soon realised that they could actually support their own form, in the same way that the bristles of a pinecone do. So I was no longer bound by the frame. This realisation was a big step in allowing the process to guide me to each work's own conclusion. And I'm always amazed by the return of these "man made objects" to an ultimately biomorphic form. It's like entropy; the conditions for existence will always lead back towards nature. The next step was to use this polyurethane and industrial fabric. It allowed for a strong bond, was non-acidic, and wouldn't stretch or tear unnecessarily. It was reliable. I would lay this fabric out, stapling it down on these large boards on the floor. We would glue into the fabric and then work the toothpicks in. In hindsight, it's almost how you would stretch out an animal skin, but instead of cleaning it we were adding to it.

The nice thing about that sealant is that it has such a long drying time. I can really get my hands on the material and push it and pull it and see what works. So there's this collective action, where you push the toothpicks on

one side and they bulge out on the other. Sometimes they want to push back. This morphing quality lends motion to these static objects, which I found incredible.

WO: It sounds almost like clay — when you push into it there's a response. I wasn't aware of that in your work.

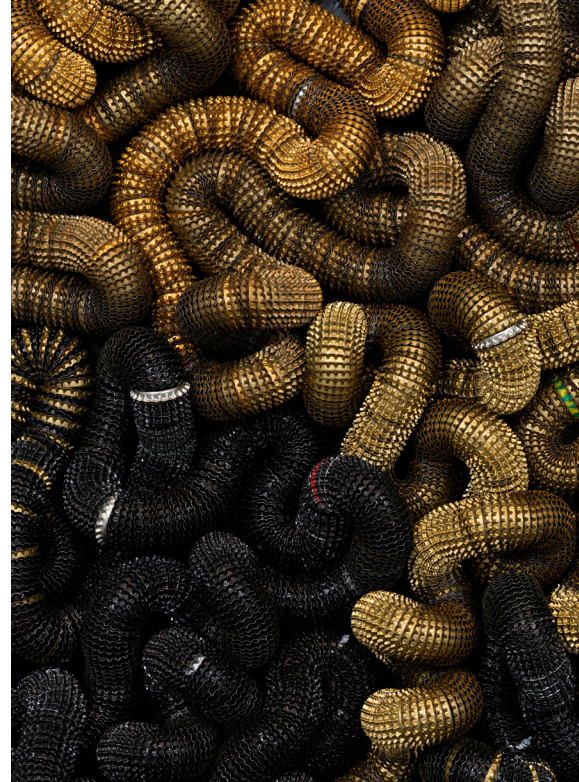
CS: In some of my works you can still see the handprints. It's like those things that kids use to create impressions, where there are two pieces of perspex and all these steel rods between them. You can put them on your face and get the impression on the other side — there was a potential for that sort of thing. People have this idea of me working incredibly meticulously, in detail, doing them one by one, but I would say eighty-percent of my process is hands on, sculpturally. In that sense my practice is quite traditional.

WO: I'm suddenly thinking of your large outdoor work *Relic* (2019–21), which involved pushing toothpicks into cement and then removing them again to leave impressions; a process of doing and undoing. To me it looks a bit like a plucked chicken. When you remove the feathers it leaves a scarred or a pock-marked skin.

CS: I get the same feeling. I really wanted to highlight that absence. What I like is that there's an immediate feeling of erosion, of organic matter, of this relationship to a ruin, even for those who don't know what material made the impression.

WO: It becomes about time. Historical time. When I look at your work I'm struck by the amplified tactility of it all, whether in bottle tops, toothpicks, or cement. The emphasis is on manifesting touch and feeling from within the material engagement. That's something that you always underline; the connection between your body and the object and how the shaping of form is related to touch. And even though we as viewers don't go up and touch your works, they certainly impart a





THIS PAGE: Chris Soal, *As below so above*, 2021. Discarded beer bottle tops onto woven steel rope, secured with polyurethane sealant on board. Wall size: 190 x 240 x 15 cm; installation size: 260 x 370 x 240 cm. Photo: Matthew Bradley. Courtesy of the artist and WHATIFTHEWORLD. **PREVIOUS PAGE:** Chris Soal, *Relic*, 2019–21. Glass fibre, reinforced concrete reliefs, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and NIROX.

strong sense of touch via vision. This is very typical of crafted objects. They appeal to our senses. I'm very interested in how you follow a material's given properties, based on what the material can do. You've spoken about how the material guides you and that there is this collaborative aspect going on. Can you comment a bit more on this?

CS: There's an act of fiddling or touching these materials, pressing them into the skin, which leaves an impression. That physical impression becomes a psychological/emotional impression, which is why I work with materials that I have a direct relationship with, as opposed to things that are more removed from my everyday. That's the origin, but the process is almost like a dance. At the beginning you and your partner are a bit awkward. You might step on each others' toes as you try to catch the rhythm, but as the night goes on and you get more comfortable with each other, you get into a flow. It's really a relationship that grows through and with time.

I can use the example of the bottle tops, the starting point was that bent cowrie shell, but I was also apprehensive because those shells are quite conceptually loaded. So how do I

express my immediate interest in the material while engaging with their histories of use? I ended up with a load of bottle tops in my studio and a new way of working with them arose — of threading them on one by one and accumulating them and letting them snake their way through my studio. It's about allowing their form to transcend itself. I'd sweep them into a corner or throw them into a box, and they kept looking like these writhing surfaces, or intestines spilling out. I'd observed these forms for five or six years, but it was only last year that I thought about incorporating them into a work. It became a whole new evolution in that body of work. So there is this thing of sowing seeds that take time to germinate.

Another example is the sandpaper. In Wits' workshop I took a piece and tried to sand some wood, and I saw how it captured the texture in the grain. I've tried various iterations throughout the years, none of which were particularly successful. It's only now, six or seven years later, that I've produced a variable edition of a print with that material. That's now grown into its own body of work. So some of the dances and partners are not so easy. Some of it takes a while, with many rehearsals, and some things that I now know

about the material, that I took for granted initially, are things that really took me a long time to figure out.

WO: I like this tactile conversation with your material, this unfolding that happens, and the reciprocity, where there's a two-way openness between you and your material. It involves a kind of making that perpetuates itself through this dialogue. It moves along. Anthropologist Tim Ingold uses the word 'alongly' to describe how this happens. But you mentioned an emotional or psychological impression, and that's quite interesting, because I think there is also this attentiveness and caring that happens in this engagement. You need to learn how to respect the material in order to be gentle with it. In my own work I often find out from my material what it won't let me do. Forms arise from this interaction. Emotion is very much at the centre of this, I think.

But I also want to address abstraction and scale; the fact that your sculptures resolve out of this process of growth into an abstract form, which could extend indefinitely. There's also the ambiguity of these objects. The viewer doesn't quite know what they are. So this idea of open-endedness interests me, and how you decide on when to stop, or on the right scale for the work?

CS: This question links to what you were saying earlier, but my bent towards abstraction started at Wits. There was an uncertainty about engaging in representation. It felt like it was a very contested space; something that artists had to defend or fight for. I wasn't really interested in that. So abstraction was a bit of an escape mechanism. I became interested in becoming hard to pin down. I want to situate these objects in a conceptual space that can't be essentialised or singularly grasped, a space that hopefully lingers a little longer. I think it's because the materials I use are so prevalent, so familiar. If I rendered them as easily

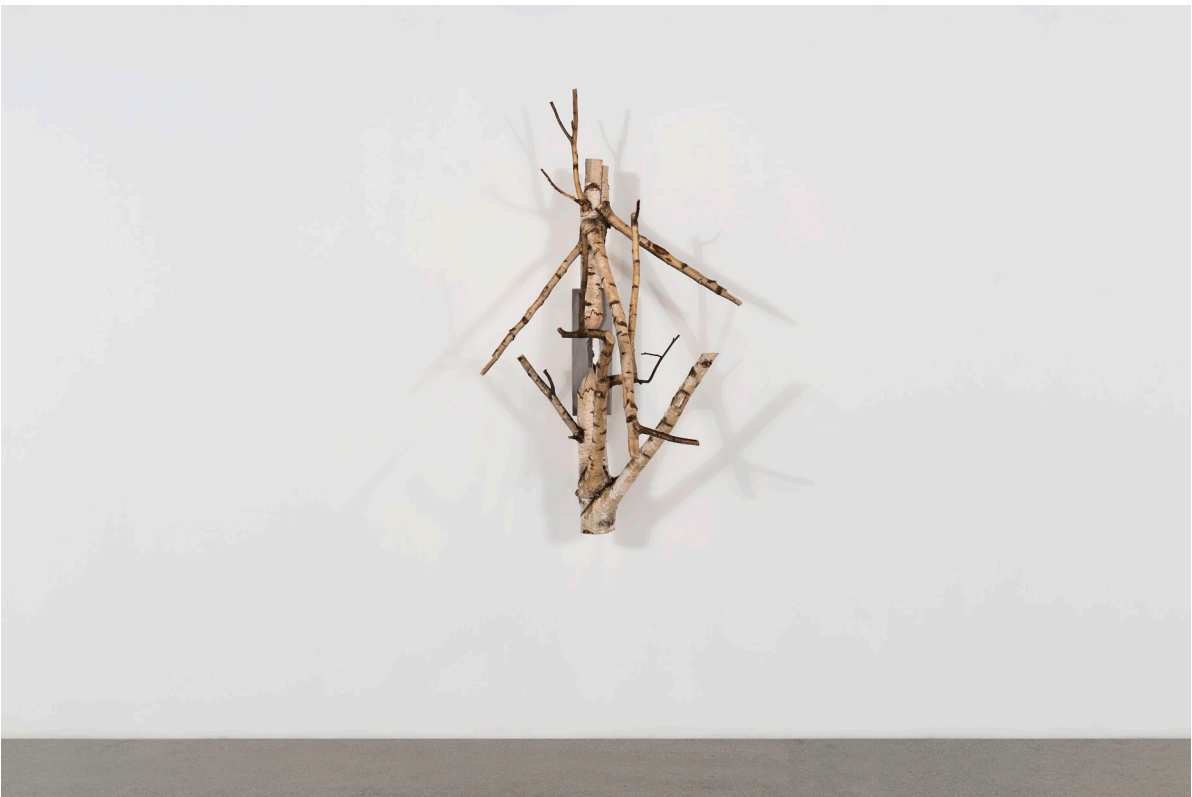
accessible we wouldn't consider them any longer than we already do.

I've been wondering about scale for a while, because a lot of the materials I work with are small. They're also uniform, because they're mass-produced. When I repeat them or amass them there's this kind of transcendence that occurs. The singular blurs into the plural. Going larger, filling the viewers' field of vision, also allows for an immersion. But the question of scale is different from that of size, because scale is more about presence. I had a solo exhibition at WHATIFTHEWORLD last year, at the beginning of 2021. There was a really large toothpick piece, the largest that I'd done, titled *Mother* (2021). It was 3.5 metres wide, and it filled your vision. On the other wall was a smaller piece, titled *Axis Mundi* (2021), which was comprised of two pieces of Birchwood, carved down to the centre ring, so as to liberate these two toothpicks, which I positioned very close to each other, almost touching. The work was half-casted in concrete, to protect and unify it. When I describe the Birchwood people remember it, but what stands out is that moment between these two slivers of wood. It was interesting how that little moment had the presence to fill this entire wall. In many ways, I think it had even more presence than *Mother*, so scale for me is about presence and space and what it feels like in the body of the viewer.

WO: A kind of attenuation, almost. I think Ashraf Jamal writes about *Axis Mundi* in his book *Strange Cargo*, if I'm not mistaken?

CS: Yes. The only other thing I'll say about these large-scale works is that they show a commitment and belief in the material, especially because I don't adorn or paint the toothpicks. There's a deep faith in the integrity of the material to stand on its own, to fill that space and to hold it for the viewer.

WO: There's a serious investment in the making as well.



TOP: Chris Soal, *Mother*, 2021. Bamboo and Birchwood toothpicks, held in polyurethane sealant on ripstop fabric and board, 400 x 270 x 35 cm;
BOTTOM: Chris Soal, *Axis Mundi*, 2021. Birchwood, concrete, and steel, 170 x 100 x 110 cm. Photos: Matthew Bradley. Courtesy of the artist and WHATIFTHEWORLD.

CS: As an artist I allow myself not to feel pressure to do something new every time, because I think the body of work reveals the strength of the idea, not the single artwork. If I need to make one-hundred pieces to get to the next phase in my development I'll make one-hundred pieces.

WO: Yes, they inform each other. It's not always a matter of novelty.

CS: Definitely. When I think about your work and some of the crossovers with my own, I'm interested in this deep engagement with the material and process, but also how your forms and concepts arise through the material. How do you arrive at the conceptual nature of your work, and what is the relationship between that and your material process?

WO: My work is a bit different in that I don't really work in an abstract way. I used to, but then I started to introduce recognisable things, which grew out of the process of weaving and its natural inclination to basket-like hollow shapes. It suggested to me animals that do something similar: the cocoon or insects that have these husk-like forms. So the direction stems from the point of material engagement — it grows out of it. This notion of growth has always been very central to the work. There's a very nice quote from Ingold, where he presents:

making as growth, in contrast to making as a project, that is, as starting out with an idea of what we want to achieve. Thinking of making as growth understands the maker as a participant among active materials and in the process of making s/he joins forces with the materials in manipulating them to see what might emerge. This is an understanding of making as a form-generating process. It is not to say that the maker does not have an idea in mind of what s/he wants to make, but an engagement with materials suggests that it is not the form that creates the work but rather the engagement with materials.

Moving along to this idea of repetitive craft, there's an Australian writer, Sera Waters, who, in an essay titled "Repetitive Crafting: The Shared Aesthetic of Time in Australian Contemporary Art" (2012), writes that this kind of work is like a marathon in that it requires physical and psychological stamina, endurance, and tenacity to see a project through. Like long-distance running, it involves finding a suitable pace and rhythm. I often count while I'm working. I wrap a length of wire four times around another piece of wire, then create a loop through the previous row, four times. But in your case maybe it's different? Could you comment on this idea of pace and rhythm, and slowness?

CS: There's a few responses to that, because there's the pace of how things generate themselves in the studio — in terms of needing to make one work before the next — and an acceptance that things are not always ready; letting the work develop at its own pace and knowing that ideas will resolve themselves in time. Within the actual making, there is a sense of surrender. There are some days when I'm in a rush or frustrated or busy, and I can actually see that in how the work comes out. It shows itself as me imposing my agenda, as opposed to tapping into the rhythm of the work. So for me it's a bit different. It's not as quiet as I think your work might be. I work alongside a few people, and there are so many different components to our work. Just laying the glue down on a metre by metre square will take fifty minutes. Then there's the packaging and placing of the toothpicks, which takes forever. So I'm often in dialogue with different people.

When we get into the studio, we might talk in the beginning, but eventually we all get into a similar unspoken rhythm that we all understand. I sometimes put my headphones on and listen to an audiobook. We stop engaging, but the work keeps flowing. I actually stole a little trick from my lecturer Karel Nel, to keep a piece of paper next to my work station. I find that when I'm working

very hands on, there's a moment where my decision-making brain switches off and things start to happen automatically. In that moment I have really fantastic ideas, or at least I think I do. [Laughs] But I jot down words or phrases that often lead to titles or observations. I relish those moments, because sometimes I get caught up in the busyness of it all. If I miss out on that during the week I'm in trouble.

WO: Yes, those are important things to take note of. This kind of contemplative attentiveness happens through repetitive action. The idea of accumulative form also interests me, like an object that is a condensed time capsule, a repository of time that the viewer also recognises when they see your work, realising the amount of time that went into the making. I really like your comment about slow making, that you have to just lean into or settle into this slow pace of working.

CS: The misconception might be that I'm very patient, and I'm almost the opposite. I think I might have gotten around this problem by working on many different things at once. So the single piece can take its time, but I'm always working. There are always other things happening, which means the works can all resolve themselves at the right time.

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