

# IN CONVERSATION

## Ali Lees with Lorrain Mailer

***Perhaps, a good place to start, would be for you to explain the thinking, that has taken you from your practice before your MA, to now, to give us a good foundation.***

I was concentrating on double standards, from the perception of the social outsider. I think it stems from the life I have led and as a way of processing it. It was a methodology for me to find a way through, to understand and a way of communicating it. It was less about me as somebody moving on.

Feeling I have accomplished this, my focus now has shifted to address the balance or rather the invisible dominance and cohesion within double standards. Cultural prejudices can be distilled into a two-sided arrangement, with an ebb and flow, pertaining to the division of power. Obviously, it is more complex and there are many more strands that make up this argument, but by and large you have a negative and a positive, conflicting force that play against one other. Should the power be reversed; the inverted result would then still be at the detriment of the weaker. A bit like colour palettes. If you saturate an image with red it will be at the expense of green and visa versa. I think that summarises my thinking.

***I've been intrigued by the inside and outside of your work and I'm wondering where you want people to see it from. Do you want people to see both the inside and the outside of the work or the perception about being around the inside and outside? You have just talked about the whole double standards being double sided. Could you say a little bit more about the inside and the outside and how you think your audience is going to think, engage with that?***

I think it embraces everything you have just mentioned. I think it is very much about how you as a viewer, come to it with your own pre-conception. It's not proscriptive, it's not dictating how you should read it. It is non-judgemental, rather it enfolds conflicting perspectives.

I'm using the process myself to understand or to generate a thought. Trying to look at a thing empirically, from different and conflicting points of view; debate, something that is not so prolific nowadays. Today you can state an opinion, but there is a tendency on either side to hector their point of view rather than debate it. There appears a reluctance to respect someone else's point of view with a courtesy to hear it through. If we did, then we might uncover a different point of view, shift our mind set and find a solution to many of our dilemmas.

It is what I hope my work hints at. It asks you to shift your mental perspective from whatever point of view you have come from, to it, while offering numerous engagements with the same object so that you can question, re-examine and hopefully re-evaluate it.

***Thank you. I have also noticed that location or place is an element. What or where inspires you, to want to place or to select a location for your work to be in? How do you choose? Is place important to the work?***

Sometimes it is, for example with *Elephant in the Room* it was particularly important that it dominated a confined space, because it represented the unspoken problem or matter, that nobody wishes to discuss, it's there, its hovering, engulfing the space. Alternatively, take the boxes in *Cover Version*, these translucent sellotape boxes need to be in a neutral environment, otherwise they are prescribing a meaning from their surroundings. I wanted this piece in this instance to communicate the divide of power between the multinational e-commerce supplier and the domestic consumer, hence the everyday point of exchange being a carpark. Other works, like *Faceless* needed to be strung across opposing walls as I knew it was extremely important that the viewer could look down the work and see the impact of a single bullet so they may appreciate the enormity, of the future generations destroyed in a single act, but also look at it from the other end too, so you just see all the resulting rupture. I think other pieces are flexible because they are interactive and take on the properties of the engagement rather than place.

***Would that also relate to your unfinished piece, Stairway?***

Ah yes, *Stairway* is a casualty of lockdown, but ironically by not completing it, it has now taken on a greater affiliation to its function. What I mean is a stairway, is a passage between different levels or floors. It has no other function other than to get someone from one place to another. It is the space between being in or out of a place, like a corridor or a station platform. It is taken for granted and like sellotape connects parts together. The completed work was to be a sellotape stairway, which was to be installed beside the original 1950's stairway in the gallery. But at present due to lockdown it has not been resealed, rather it appears like a snake skin, shed from its body, discarded, unfunctional and without value.

***Going back, you have talked about enfolding and enfoldment. Are you inside the folding or are you outside the folding? Or can you be both?***

(Laughs) My process may answer this question because I consider I am neither. The original object needs the sellotape wrapped around it, where the clear side is up against the object. The sticky side is on the outside, so it picks up the residue of the object, captures particles from the environment or through the pressure I apply to it. Then this residue is sealed in, incarcerated, trapped as the sellotape adheres glue to glue. The template is then sculpted around and released to leave the husk. So, it is all of these things, the process of folding, the glue and the trace within the glue. I suppose I could be perceived as the line between, the ambivalence.

***I like that idea of the glue.***

It also has my fingerprints; it has my trace. My hair got caught in it once. It's very much got my identity in it. Not only the process but the residue. (laughter)

***Absolutely, from what you are saying there is a deep natural process as well.***

The haptic, it is definitely cathartic

***There is that, the haptic, there is also a contradiction of the material itself, the plastic and its longevity with everything in this day and age, that that represents. Could you talk about that, if somebody brought it up; that this material will be around for hundreds and hundreds of years.***

Sellotape itself has a quality of sticking things together, it's about wrapping, patch mending or sealing. Once used it cannot be reused and therefore is thrown away. It serves a function and then it's superfluous, redundant. It is an everyday, overlooked item tucked away in every household and brought out annually to wrap our presents.

And you say, rightly, it stays for ever. This almost inconceivable, indistinguishable object does not enfold into the natural ecological cycle. Unless we compare it with stone. Stone is derived from gases which cooled down, compressed and solidified billions of years ago. Their composition and texture will ultimately disintegrate as will cellophane into minuscule and ever decreasing particles.

It is the staggering volume, with our inability to know what to do with this recent but permeant material that is so alarming. The lack of ability we have, to comprehend the consequences of our dependency on petrol-based plastics that needs urgent rethinking. I do want to make this very clear I am not advocating the production of oil-based plastics, but we have this product all around us. We need to reevaluate it, maybe harness it for the future and deal with it constructively.

In my work I am using sellotape as a metaphor for the longevity, endurance and unseen spirit to life. I don't want to go into heavy philosophy but there is a thought that all matter filters in and out of itself, so geological or manmade scientific matter will ultimately be absorbed, flows in and out of everything, from solids, tissue, energy, conscious thought to undetectable matter in negative space.

***Is it important that you are using that product as you haven't found a biodegradable one?***

A biodegradable product at this moment is not feasible because it is the plastic-based glue which is the issue not the tape. You can get biodegradable cellophane but not a strong glue. There are algae or hoof-based glues, which sadly do not retain their stickiness over time. I would like to work with a petrol chemical company to find a solution; either something that will responsibly and ecologically break down oil-based plastics or replace it with a biodegradable product. If I can get funding, I would then follow it through with a PhD perhaps exploring my brother's project with sugar-based plastics.

But for this moment in time, I am dealing with packaging today's commercialism, driven by multinational and unaccountable market forces, that feed a dependency, in a complicit and throw away domestic buyer. I wanted it particularly to be a delivery box and sellotape material.

***The overlooked, throw away, would you like to say a little bit more about it?***

I think there is a growing rumble within art and the broader implications of representation. There is also a sense of dissatisfaction coming up from the marginalised and overlooked voter, of being insignificant, feeling impotent to effect change. There is an awareness of poverty, overcrowding, homelessness and hunger, which is not being addressed by our institutions. There is a reluctance to implement economic and social changes to consumption, soil management, agricultural methods,

through to food production and the manufacture of drugs and plastics. I think art is part and parcel of challenging this lack of taking responsibility and our 'throw away' attitude. It serves as a voice and a space in which everyone can think and contemplate a way forward.

*I can, through talking with you, sense that this is not something you have just come up with, it feels your question right now and what you are working with right now has got its roots somewhere in the past. There is a nature connection, a finance connection and a way of looking at things in a different way. So, would you say your practice has evolved out of a long-lasting interest or something else?*

An interesting observation, maybe it is my roots. I come from a Scottish family with inherent values; with deep-rooted beliefs (and it sounds patronising in this day and age) to the nature of responsibility; that if you are privileged that you are morally obliged to help less fortunate people. There is an old and lovely saying and I'm not religious "there but for the grace of God go I". I suppose that has been ingrained in me. But it is not just a responsibility to my fellow being but to my fellow planet. Everything ecologically is interdependable. It all goes back to the balance of two forces.

To keep a ship on an even keel you have got to make sure the balance is right. So therefore, ecologically you have to make sure the soil is right, that you preserve species regardless of whether we consider them important; otherwise you have imbalance and potentially will capsize. I don't know if it's because of my father's work in conservation, because I come from an army family, where life is valued due to its precarious nature, or being a mother; all I know is it drives me.

***It's interesting going back to how you started talking about double standards and you could equally look at "the convention" of your background as double standards?***

Yes (laughs) well that definitely comes out. But the positive side is that I was raised to consider myself equal to a man in thinking. My earliest recollections were of my father reading me *the Iliad* so I do not understand why the sexes are not considered equal. Yes, we have physical differences but there appears to be a cohesion, a hidden agreement in order to retain dominance and minimise potential competition, from the opposite sex, educational background, ethnic minorities to people perceived as disabled. Society today has increasingly acquired a system of elaborate and concealed strands of double standards.

***That is why I find your boxes, your practice with sellotape very poignant because of it's internal and it's external and the barrier between, almost as if you are the glue that holds the whole, the glue as well, together.***

Well that opens questions of fragility and responsibility.

***Yes exactly.***

No I'm just a trace of someone passing through.