

# Thought Trails

The Oxford-born, London-based artist, who works across painting, sculpture, video and installation, discusses the infinite, the particular, and the power of association, following trails of thought wherever they might lead.

Christina Mackie interviewed by Chris Fite-Wassilak



'Putting the Weights', 2012, installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London

**Chris Fite-Wassilak:** Your exhibition, 'Material Reality' at CCA Goldsmiths, includes three distinct installations from across your practice: the primarily sculptural tabletop set-up of *The Judges II* from 2011, the digital animations of *Powder People* made in 2018, and then a new installation that manages to incorporate recently made oil paintings, watercolours and a video from the past few years, alongside a painting of yours from the 1980s. A recurring image in this installation is a series of cranes in a harbour seen across a horizon at sea. What is it that attracts you about the port as an image, or as an idea?

**Christina Mackie:** I have always been fascinated by cranes. They're really a transcendent object, but they are also structural, a heavy-duty lifting device with intricate steel work. The painting here, which is 40 years old, is of a crane alongside smaller, close-up paintings of cranes that I have made from the past month. But with the painting of the far-off port, I think of people, or perhaps of yourself, getting further away. I have never, in fact, been up close to a port, I have only seen these types of crane from miles away.

There is a sort of submerged sensibility in the watercolours, as if you're seeing what exists underneath the port and the water, while the oil paintings have a more diagrammatic sensibility, like semi-abstracted graphs or diagrams.

One thing I was thinking about with the new paintings was really grappling with being in systems, inside structures, and trying to see what they are. The video *Deltaport*, which I made last year, features these paintings and acts as a scene-setter, there is no incident, just ships coming and going – container ships. Sometimes you see these cones of sulphur on the back of a barge. It's a context, it's in the real world. I really want there to be a sense that there is a world beyond this outside. This is not art as a self-enclosed system – it's part of the world.

That sense of looking at structures in an aesthetic way seems to be an important aspect of all your work. Do you use aesthetics as a way to think about what envelops us beyond the gallery?

For many years I just painted. You have to acknowledge that paintings are what they are, which is a very thin surface. That is what a painting is. Even if it isn't a representation, it's just a thin abstraction of the world. But when I went from painting to sculpture – if you start putting actual real things in a room, that's sculpture, that's the real world, material reality. I'm still very interested in pigment and paint – paint is, you know, finely ground particles.



*Powder People*, 2018, installation view

You have spoken in the past about watercolours as 'particulate sculpture'. But even the older oil painting you brought into this installation, where a crane arm emerges at an angle from a series of paint splatters, seems to fit right in here; the framing of it is reminiscent of your video *Irrig* from 2005, where we see the top of a watering rig among pine-covered hills, which is another work of yours that focuses on infrastructure in landscape.

That was a video of an industrial watering system up in the north of Canada. Here's the thing with paintings: unless you're gonna do stripes or something, you know, they're all situated somewhere. You read into them.

That situating is interesting in relation to your work because, in the paintings and your other installations, there is a consistent tension between figuration and abstraction, where shapes - in this case cranes, but in the others you see moving particles, or the suggestion of faces - are less apparent or more detached in some way from being definable or pinned down, a metaphor for something else at the same time.

I try to stay away from figuration. I struggle to look at the real world, to recognise the real world. I'm not one of these people merely hopping around seeing wonderful sights all the time. Although I'm not trying to make a representation, when I do make something that hits on how things function visually, I'm very happy.

The cranes and thoughts about such hopping around make me think of an old Rayner Banham essay, 'Flatscape with Containers', where he is in Tilbury surveying the shipping port and celebrating it, portraying that sort of tarmac landscape and transportation network as a new sublime.

I think about the Malcolm Lowry story, when they're living in Dollarton in a shack on the water. He's battling his alcoholism and across the way there's a Shell oil refinery, but the 's' is burnt out. These are the things I think about when I'm working.



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Just to think about process, are those sorts of images starting points for a work for you?

No, they have come out of the work, out of the painted surface. I don't set off to do them. You look in the painted surface to see what's there. You are looking into the surface, every day seeing what indication there is of where you can bring it forward, where you can bring it into the world. Every day, just the smallest amount you can make more real. And in the end out comes this thing.

There is a synaesthetic aspect to your work, in moving between media to explore parallel ideas. It feels like you are thinking through an idea, that might be a painting idea but you're thinking through it in sculpture; or at other times you're thinking through a sculpture idea in a painting, and a painting idea in a video. When your work involves, say, video or sculpture or the complex installation you have here, how does it start for you? While your works are layered and cumulative, they don't strike me as having emerged from the surface of a painting.

In the case of *Powder People*, my starting point was when you arrive in another country, perhaps an airport, and there is a big crowd that is slowly filtered. The visual material of the digital animations comes from that, while another draws from silos. What do you do with powdered material, like flour? It's combustible. There are a lot of fascinating images of how you deal with powder.



‘Putting the Weights’, 2012, installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London

**Watching the videos, there are these small circles flying around different containers, and there is a confusion of scale; they could be atoms or mineral particles, or representations of anything being sorted through a system, from toys or eggs, even humans.**

I remember when I was a kid, I had a friend on San Juan Island near Vancouver, and we used to do what you’re not allowed to do, which is to play in the granary. It’s just a big bin full of grain that you could potentially swim in. You could, obviously, easily drown in it. Running your hand or your leg through grain, knowing that you could die. And then thinking about the scary powerful thing of being filtered through Heathrow, or any airport’s check points where they file you down one particle at time. There are these beautiful diagrams and studies of different mechanisms of power. As you’re thinking about something, all these memories and visuals and meanings are constantly shifting.

In the case of *The Judges*, the starting point was visiting this geological site. There was a storm coming. The sky was black. All these rocks were all lit up, and they all looked as if they had these ugly, horrible, scary faces in them. Especially with these big rocks, you felt

that you were being judged. Like, if I just throw all the collected stuff together? Can I summon these ancient creatures out of thin air? You are just a passing atom – your life, as complete and as rich as you can make it, it is still a fraction of nothing. So, I wondered, can I replicate that.

Though each of the installations are very different materially, and they each stage very different ways of looking, there is a common element that emerges from them. Like that sense of being watched by rocks, or how *Powder People* feels like we are given a glimpse of planning and designing those mechanisms of control. Even in the room with the paintings and watercolours, where you have installed a hanging cloth sculpture with eyes cut out of it – as if it’s looking at the images of cranes – there seems to be consistent foregrounding in your work of the importance of orientation and observation, an invitation to self-awareness about how these phenomena are perceived by an observer. There is a zooming in and out of scales and distances, so there’s a constant repositioning that questions where you are in relation to these things.

**If you are out in the world and you’re not living on the internet, then you’re constantly being fed with the random and the infinite variety of the world, you are being given opportunities by what you observe. You’re given a vision. What are you gonna do with it?**

You're not guiding, you're just making it possible for people to mentally fire off associations, thinking through a set of ideas. It's like the real world. You're looking in one direction, but behind you there is something else.

You're hanging around living your life, you observe something, you think, 'Well, that's a bit odd.' What are you gonna do with it? Are you gonna use it or are you gonna just let it go? It's a constant. If you are out in the world and you're not living on the internet, then you're constantly being fed with the random and the infinite variety of the world, you are being given opportunities by what you observe. You're given a vision. What are you gonna do with it? You can use it. You can riff on it. You can play around with it. You can turn it into art if you want to.

That playfulness feels evident in *The Judges*, as an installation that puns on imagery and materiality: piles of pigment alongside dribbles of paint, masses of clay next to watercolours that vaguely resemble them, alongside a video of various objects being smashed to tiny pieces. There is an emphasis on physicality, while at the same time the constant shifts between media give a sense of porosity and openness.

The means and method of making is there in the work. There is a great deal of looking for meaning in it for me. Artists are always asking: 'Oh, when should I stop? When is it finished?' It is true that this is a big subject, because reaching that point where you think, well, I think it's there, but what is it? It is *there*. And for a moment you're, like, 'Ah, there it is.'

The sense of experimentation creates this feeling that you are not pursuing a particular subject but using the materials to pursue an elusive idea or a metaphor. You might point towards hidden structures in your work, but you're not explaining them or making them literal. Your work appears more as an open invitation to ways of orientating ourselves amongst these structures. The tables allow viewers to navigate it and form their own way through it, to see how it was all put together; they become their own moving particle around the space. It feels like you are also another disoriented observer alongside us, but in staging these models of thought, would you see yourself as a guide or a fellow explorer?

Not a guide at all but just indicating. If you've got 50 elements, and people see only three of them, they're going to be linked in their mind. You're not guiding, you're just making it possible for people to mentally fire off associations, thinking through a set of ideas. It's like the real world. You're looking in one direction, but behind you there is something else. I'm always having this argument with my nieces and nephews, trying to get them to recognise that the real world is infinitely variable, but they think the internet is more variable. The information density of the real world is 100,000 times greater than the digital world.

The tables in *The Judges* are my actual studio tables. So, this is the studio. This is the unfolding of a bunch of ideas together, and a bunch of processes. Over time, I added things for different venues, different shapes of room, it's been in flux. These are the details that lead to the trail, that lead to the thought.

**Christina Mackie**'s exhibition 'Material Reality' continues at CCA Goldsmiths, London, until 19 April.

**Chris Fite-Wassilak** is a writer based in London.



*Deltaport*, 2025, video