

# PLAYING, FILLING, MIXING, BRIMMING

No. It has to be honest. Helen discards an elaborate plan to make a door-sized sculpture look like it's been cast in her mould of choice; a cardboard box.

Yes. It has to be honest. Otherwise, what's the point? What's the point of dedicating your life to the rarely remunerating career-choice of artmaking; of breaking your budget on hundreds of kilos of plaster; of spending every waking hour turning over a myriad of decisions in your head – if you end up just striking a pose; pretending to mean something you don't? It has to be honest. But what does that mean? How does one retain honesty while making, titling, presenting a work of art?

It is tempting to think of this effort in reductive terms: of eliminating superfluous gestures, avoiding illusions and pretensions, of peeling away the layers to find a perfectly resonant, simply expressed core. The core isn't there though. Art is always a balance of colliding concerns. One discovers that it is as honest to be carried away by the possibilities of a technique as it is to present a ready-made. Or it can be as honest to wear a mask as to wear one's heart on one's sleeve. The striving for honesty is an expansive, fluid and in(de)finite undertaking.

When pressed on the point of what an honest approach to material would mean Helen's answer is as simple as it is ambiguous: it mustn't feel like she's faking it. The work can be as artificial as can be – plaster prepped to saturation point with pastel-coloured pigments, patterns taken through numerous steps of tracing and manipulation – but it must not *feel contrived*. Force, then, seems to form an antipode to honesty. If we run with that proposition; might *play* be the road leading towards our goal?

Helen revels in using the word 'playful' to describe her work. Any connotation to children however, and she kicks back. To some, such a distinction may seem arbitrary, maybe even vain. It is not. It is a very conscious demarcation against those who see play as a phase of life, once gone through not to be revisited; those who consider play as somehow opposed to serious work. For Helen, it is integral to serious work. Play, after all, is nothing but a complex of primal urges. Urges to be recognised, explored and deployed in the quest for honest expression.

Can the urges of play be mapped? Probably not, but it might prove fun to try.

There is of course filling. You have a bucket. There is sand. You put the sand in the bucket. You pat it down. You fill up with more. You try to scrape the surface perfectly flat, to make container and material into a holy unity. There was space, now there is thingness.

Few might be willing to recognise it as play, but the joy of filling stays with us:  
A toolbox with a perfectly sized compartment for each tool;  
a glass that fits snugly within another glass;  
a building, shooting up from a vacant lot in the city centre;  
a stream of creamy plaster nearing the opening of a tight-fitting mould.  
Irresistible. Compulsive.

Patterns may constitute the most appealing of all filling-encounters. Not only are they unbeatable for filling up space - the room = the container; the herring-bone tiles = the filler, encircling each nook and cranny with repetitious zest - they are also themselves eminently fillable. Have you ever sat in front of a gridded paper, with a pen in reach, and been able to resist starting to colour the squares in, one by one? We put the lines down to feel scientific and rational. Then we give in to the urge, begin filling the spaces in between and are soon carried away.

You find yourself in a room with an empty bookshelf. You want to fill it.

Filling as sole implement of play soon reveals itself as a cul-de-sac. Once the short, sweet satisfaction of scraping off the minute overflow putty from that crack in the wall has evaporated there are but two, equally unattractive options: to undo what has just been achieved, or to stop playing. Among the urges of play, filling is the most conservative, as its results are static. Lucky then, that there is combination: the perpetuum mobile of play. Posit your filled container upon another filled container. Or, better still, use two different fillers in the same container. Swirl them around. Make them splash up on the confining walls in protest of geometry. Now there is movement again.

Sat in front of your half-filled graph paper you look around to find a set of coloured pencils. You start by making a rainbow scale. When that begins to look too perfect you start making random series. Soon the challenge is to find the strangest meetings of colours, and before long you are using three pens within the same square to create a nauseating, marbled purple-brown.

Combining turns from harmonizing to mixing and from mixing to clashing, and these are the rebellious urges by which we evolve. From pattern to movement to disorder and then... to a new order?

The success of the project depends on a third urge of play; the act of balancing. Maybe this is what all play aims for; to go to the edge and see how far over it you can lean. To test the limits. This is the urge that made you fill up your glass with milk until you could see it protruding like a thin cushion above the brim and then try to slurp it down without it spilling over. How many different sorts of sweets can you put in your mouth at the same time before it goes from delicious to gross? Will another shot of tequila make me too drunk, or just drunk enough?

After a third reshuffling of plaster-blocks in the bookshelf Helen stands back and observes silently for a long time. There are so many variations. So much colour. So many violent collisions. It is almost too much. No. It is getting there. There's a gleam of excitement in her eyes. She is brimming.

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