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# Materiality, subjectivity and abjection in the work of Chohreh Feyzджou, Nina Saunders and Cathy de Monchaux.

**Pennina Barnett**

This paper is about materiality, a sense of the raw stuff or substance from which things are made. It explores the interplay between making, materials and ideas. More specifically it focuses on the relationship between materiality, subjectivity and abjection in the work of three artists: Chohreh Feyzджou, Nina Saunders and Cathy de Monchaux, using a psychoanalytic framework informed by the writings of Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva.

I am often drawn to work that 'speaks of its making'; where making is, in a sense, also its subject. My interest in materiality developed while I was writing about the work of the late Chohreh Feyzджou (1955-1996), an Iranian-born artist working in Paris. There was something about her work, a rawness of facture, that drew me to it. It is very dark work, in every sense of the word. She covered everything with a layer of black glue and pigment. Her last installation, *Boutique Product of Chohreh Feyzджou* was shown over a period of several months at Le Monde de l'Art Rive Gauche, a gallery in Paris. It was comprised of boxes, crates and rolls of canvas containing her earlier paintings and drawings, some wrapped in plastic, others mounted on huge rusty scaffolds. On one level, the work is a critique of capitalism, of the fact that everything has become a commodity, including art. The installation was arranged to look like a shop or bazaar, but although each object bears a small label Product of Chohreh Feyzджou, their unattractiveness denies the possibility of commodification.

Of all the work that makes up the installation, I find the boxes of tiny forms most disturbing. They remind me of trays of putrefied fruit, laid out in a market stall. Their physical presence overwhelms. Some are encrusted with feathers and



Chohreh Feyzdjou *Boutique Product of Chohreh Feyzdjou*. 1996. 3 photos  
Photo: Jeremy Raphaely. Final installation, Le Monde de L'art, Paris.

bones, like clumps of mud; others contain small stretched canvasses thickly pasted with black pigment; or shattered claypipes; rolls of synthetic fur; scrunched pieces of paper and plastic; balls of horsehair, pigment and wax. Some are regular, others more roughly hewn; some are dense and hard; others weightless; some feel sticky, others soft and still malleable - touching them dirties the fingers. This is how Chohreh Feyzdjou described the process of their making:

When I started working with black wax, I remember thinking black is like darkness, you feel much better when you can no longer see the things you fear. The tactile qualities are the only thing that determine the materials I use, and black allows me to concentrate on this in a way that I can't with colour... Soft materials feel very alive...and because the wax was hot and malleable I mixed it with other materials, and the forms were coming out by themselves - it's like a dance, a dialogue with the materials...They are not really objects in the classic sense...you have to take care of them, protect them. They are very fragile - if you touch them, they have a quality of their own...they change with the heat, with shock, they have something to do with life, with animals, insects, plants or fruits.<sup>1</sup>

The work speaks of wax rolled in the palms of the hands, or squeezed between the fingers, like a child playing with its shit. It is as if, in the very materiality of the work, the process of its making is laid bare; yet it is not only its physical making that is exposed - the mixing of wax and pigment - but also something of the psychic processes of subjectivity: the processes by which we learn to take our place in the world.



Above: Nina Saunders *Pure Thought I* (1995). upholstered white leather, 36"x47"x32" © Artist. Photo: Red Saunders

Right: Nina Saunders *Pure Thought IV* (1997). upholstered white leather, 10' diameter. © Artist. Photo: Red Saunders



From the rough materiality of Chohreh Feyzdjou's installation, to the soft, sensuous work of Nina Saunders. *Pure Thought I* (1995), is an immaculately upholstered white leather sofa. At its centre, covering the seat, is a white circular swelling like an outsize and tumorous growth. Made for the 1996 Sculpture in the Close exhibition at Jesus College, Cambridge, Nina Saunders originally intended it to be placed in a senior common room furnished with leather sofas - although it ended up in the College Chapel. Nina Saunders sees it as a provocative comments on an elite and privileged world of pure ideas and the confidence of knowledge ..which in reality isn't quite so pure....<sup>2</sup>

*Pure Thought IV*, a later work in the same series, is a large white sphere - ten feet in diameter - this time upholstered in white leatherette. It was first shown in her 1997 solo exhibition at the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool. Nina Saunders describes it as: 'something that could contain hidden things, growing and bursting... as if something has grown out of all proportion and isn't quite right...It has some terrible, destructive element to it that is contained, on the edge...I've spent a lot of time wondering if I could make fear visible, what would it look like?'<sup>3</sup>

Tactility, making and materials are central to its affect. Her sofa and chair pieces are upholstered in one piece, which gives the material around the bulge a particular tautness, and sets up an emotional tension. She sees the upholstered swelling as having a transformative function, that of defamiliarising domestic objects.

This sense of the familiar made strange, is an idea an idea that Freud explored in his famous essay 'The Uncanny' written in 1919. He defines the uncanny as that

class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.<sup>4</sup> Freud traces the etymology of the German word *unheimlich* (literally: unhomely), and discovers an ambiguity in its meaning. *Heimlich* (homely) has contradictory meanings: it simultaneously signifies intimacy and domestic comfort, and the hidden or withheld. So heimlich and unheimlich, which logically should be opposites, actually suggest the same thing. Freud also argues that the uncanny represents the reappearance of repressed material from childhood. In his account, the unheimlich represents the male fear of the female genitals, and of that most familiar of places, the maternal body - the prefix 'un', being the sign of the repression.

To me Nina Saunders' sofa and chair sculptures contain something of this contradiction in their play of opposites: beauty / revulsion; comfort / discomfort, homeliness / alienation: the swelling is like a symptom of something wrong. Furthermore, in the context of Freud's essay, *Pure Thought IV* might be read as an 'obscene fecundity'<sup>5</sup> that must be kept at bay. In psychoanalytical terms, the maternal body is the primary object from which the infant defines its own boundaries, to differentiate between inside and outside, a me and not me. The scale of *Pure Thought IV*, would easily allow it to accommodate an adult, and stepping tentatively around its bulk, it contains a sense of both the intimacy and claustrophobia associated with the maternal body. But there is also a sense of loss. For if the mother is the first lost object, then the first lost space is the maternal space;<sup>6</sup> and in *Pure Thought IV*, an object of longing and taboo, an impossible nostalgia or fantasy of 'return' is played out.

The work of Cathy de Monchaux, exhibited at the Whitechapel Art Gallery (1997) is multi-layered and similarly refuses any single reading. It makes reference to organic forms (crustacea, fossils), animals, erotic and fetishistic imagery, turn-of-the-century decorative traditions, architectural detailing and saintly relics. Suffused with all this, yet refusing any explanation, it is like some narrative to which we are given clues, yet denied access. Cathy de Monchaux suggests that the work evokes a world with its own internal logic.

Similarly, its making appears to be determined by a set of internal rules or procedures, and like the pieces by Chohreh Feyzjou and Nina Saunders, its materiality is central to its affect. It speaks through metals riveted, bolted and pierced; cloth crushed, folded and puckered; ribbons lashed, threaded and tied. Materials here become highly charged: leather, pink and faded evokes the flesh; metals, often spikey and rusted, contain and constrict; lead, dull and heavy, evokes mortality. Further emphasising its deathly quality is the fine chalky dust sprinkled upon the surface of the work - reminiscent of the film of darkness that covers the objects in Chohreh Feyzjou's installation. For both artists, this device unifies the diverse materials and objects that make up their installations.

The materiality in both provokes an emotional and sensuous response that can be explored through Julia Kristeva's ideas on the formation of subjectivity. Julia Kristeva came to Paris in 1968 and studied with Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan.



Left: Cathy de Monchaux *Trust Your Sanity to No-one* (1996) brass, leather, chalk and diamonte. 9 parts: each 17x10x5 cm. Right: Cathy de Monchaux. Detail of *Dangerous Fragility* (1994) Brass, leather, ribbons and chalk Two parts: 48x40x13cm.

A predominant feature of her work is its concern with analysing the seemingly unanalysable or inexpressible. Her early work explored the connection between language and its importance in the formation of the subject. Much psychoanalytic writing has argued that it is through language that we gain entry to the sphere of social relations, and become speaking subjects, able to articulate our needs and desires: an "I", able to differentiate itself from others. It is through language that we gain entry to the sphere of social relations, and become speaking subjects, able to articulate our needs and desires: an "I", able to differentiate itself from others.

In her doctoral thesis, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). Julia Kristeva developed her theory of the semiotic. (This is distinct from what we have come to call semiotics - the study of signs.) The semiotic, is distinguished from 'the symbolic', that is the sphere of representation, images and all forms of fully articulated language. The semiotic (in Kristeva) is like the raw material or base of language - its sounds and rhythms. It is associated with the mother-infant dyad or union, and the state of symbiosis and dependence before the infant acquires language. Julia Kristeva writes of the 'semiotic chora', derived from the Greek semiotic, suggests a mark or trace, while 'chora' is an enclosed space or womb.<sup>7</sup> The semiotic is the pre-verbal signifying realm, a realm of exchange between mother and baby which functions through sound - the rhythmic pattern of the voice, through tone, gesture, smell, touch.

Julia Kristeva argues that in order to enter the symbolic, (ie formal language and social relations), this 'other' of language must be repressed. But the repression is





Left: Cathy de Monchaux. Details of *Cruising Disaster* (1996)  
Rusted steel, leather and chalk. 3 parts: each 184 x 28 x 4 cm.  
Right: Cathy de Monchaux *Dangerous Fragility* (1994)  
Brass, leather, ribbons and chalk Two parts: 48x40x13cm.



only partial, for the semiotic seeps through and can be perceived as a pulsational pressure within the symbolic, evident in avant-garde writing, (especially poetry), through rhythm, repetition and alliteration; and also through that which disrupts language and sense: dissonance, fragmentation, contradiction, meaninglessness, silence and absence. If the symbolic would name, the semiotic is un-nameable. It is like a memory-trace of the prelinguistic state of mother- infant symbiosis.

So how might Julia Kristeva's ideas be useful in considering the affect of materiality in these artists work? I have described materiality as a sense of the raw stuff from which things are made, a rawness barely disguised or mediated. Might we see traces of the semiotic in the work of Chohreh Feyzjdjou or Cathy de Monchaux - with its rhythmic repetition that ceases to signify; in de Monchaux's mixing of male and female genitalia, (eg *Cruising Disaster*) where meaning is contradictory and disrupted; or Feyzjdjou's tiny wax forms, objects-in-the-making.

On the other hand, we see the symbolic at work, containing, repressing, holding down - repetition as an attempt to order and keep chaos at bay. Cathy de Monchaux touches upon the double function of repetition when she talks of the repeating patterns in her work: it can be read as abstract pattern which becomes almost a plain surface; yet close up it remains imagery within the terms of reference she has invented, tiny animals, genitals, hands.<sup>8</sup>

Monchaux's works, when they were shown at the Whitechapel, created an emotional charge through their tension of beauty and horror, pleasure and disgust, outside and inside (see especially works like *Dangerous Fragility*, 1994). For me they operate within the realm of the Julia Kristeva's 'abject'. Although the dictionary definition defines this as 'despicable' and 'abased', Julia Kristeva appropriates the term for her own purposes in *Powers of Horror*.<sup>9</sup> For her, the abject, which includes tears, saliva, faeces, urine, vomit and mucus, marks the bodily sites which will later become erotogenic zones - eyes, mouth, anus, nose, genitals orifices which are on the border between inside and outside. These abjects can never be fully expelled, for they are the precondition of material, that is bodily existence. In order to survive we

ingest and expel. The ingested and expelled stuff is never quite distinct from us, for it is neither part of our bodies nor separate from them. The abject is both inside and outside, dead and alive, marking the site of life itself.

Julia Kristeva relates the abject to the mother-infant dyad. Here, the infant has no sense of boundaries. In order to become autonomous, it rejects the maternal body and turns it into what she calls an 'abject'. Thus the infant's sense of self, rests upon a debasement and prohibition of the maternal body - that is the incest taboo.<sup>10</sup> For me, Cathy de Monchaux's work elicits both disgust and horror precisely because it explores the boundaries of the body. To achieve autonomy the infant must cross the border into life; but the mother is an ambiguous figure: she is both life-giving and death-dealing, for to be born also means one must die.

If Nina Saunders' *Pure Thought IV*, large, round and fecund, evokes the lost maternal space, then Cathy de Monchaux's film of white dust and Chohreh Feyzjdjou's layer of dark pigment are like signs of mortality. Although visually different, for me, all three artists explore the body, the interplay of inside and outside, and the notion of the border as a site of demarcation and undecideability between life and death. Without the signs of the abject, life cannot continue. For as Julia Kristeva writes:

How can I be without border.....in that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything! I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

1. Chohreh Feyzjdjou, taped interview with Pennina Barnett, Paris, 22nd June 1995. For further information on the work of Chohreh Feyzjdjou see listings in Gavin Jantjes (ed) *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with artists on Internationalism*, INIVA, London, 1998.

2. Nina Saunders, taped interview with Pennina Barnett, cited in Pennina Barnett, 'Purity and Fear', *Make: the magazine of women's art* no 74, March 1997.

3. *ibid.*

4. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', (1919), in *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol 19, Hogarth Press, 1955, p217-252.

5. 'Obscene fecundity' is an expression used by Dianne Chisholm in her entry on the 'Uncanny' in Elizabeth Wright (ed.), *Feminism and Psychoanalysis, A Critical Dictionary*, Blackwell, Oxford, ~ and Cambridge, Mass, 1992

6. see Jon Bird, 'Dolce Domum' in James Lingwood (ed.) *Rachel Whiteread - house* Phaidon Press, 1995, p19.

7. see Toril Moi, *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p.13.

8. Cathy de Monchaux, interview with Louisa Buck, *Tate magazine*, Summer 1997

9. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, Columbia University Press, New York 1982.

10. This is drawn from Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* and the 'Kristeva' entry written by Elizabeth Grosz in Elizabeth Wright, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* op. cit.

11. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* p.4.

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