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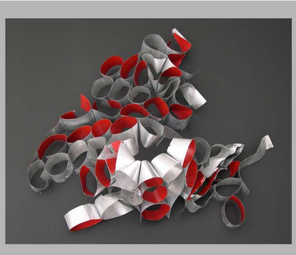
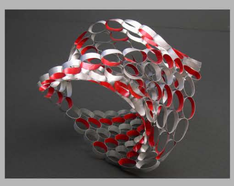


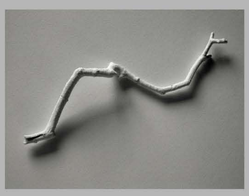
On returning to my studio after a year's break due to breaking my wrist, my collarbone 3 times, ribs and my hand I found my aesthetic preferences had altered. This section focuses on how my work developed as a result in trying to define those changes, including a new element of risk.

Prior to breaking bones I had been working on repeated structures made from coke cans. This work explored boundaries and breaks between interior and exterior space. My position teaching art at Reading Prison gave me access to research the space. I was inspired by the meshes and bars that, in combination with regulations around movement, enable control and restriction. Clear sight lines across the panopticon space accentuated the restriction as you could see where you wanted to go but had to take a circuitous route to get there.

When I returned to my studio again and looked at these sculptures I could not identify with them at all. I was in a completely different place to the one when I had started making it. Of all the pieces in my studio constructed prior to breaking my bones there was only one with which I could identify. This was a broken sculpture that the roof of my studio had fallen on and squashed. The perfect wholeness of the other pieces was frustrating, I felt revulsion for their perfection because it seemed unreal, posed and fake. I no longer viewed this aesthetics of wholeness that I had strived for as natural but rather as a construct that now felt alien. I wanted to break and twist them and destroy their sense of wholeness.

I felt the 'whole' sculptures were controlled and restricted in their structure; in work prior to my PhD I had always disrupted structures but this had never occurred with these. I broke the whole sculptures hoping to reintroduce the disruption. However, these intentionally broken ones never had the same feel as that first one that the roof fell on. They were too composed, too consciously arranged. Only the first one remained closest to breaking this ingrained control. In moving on from here I decided to find a less predictable and flexible material and thought of bone china due to its content of 40% bone ash relating to my broken bones.





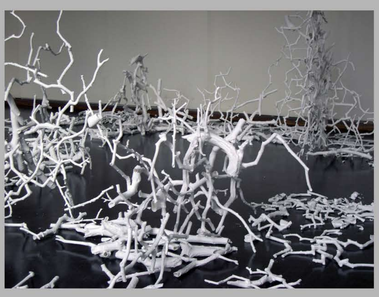
I was attracted to the bone china by its apparent fragility and associations of accidentally breaking china in the home. I had been drawing trees supported by crutches in Japan and saw the branches as limb-like and this inspired me to use twigs and braches from trees to cast in bone china. To make the bone china twigs I create a plaster mould of the original twig and then pour in a layer of bone china slip. I leave the moulds for a couple of hours until the clay is plastic and then take the moulds apart to remove the china twig. I am tense as I take the mould apart, hoping that the twig will be whole and not have cracked from over drying. If it is whole I continue to work very slowly and carefully to remove it in one piece since they can suddenly break at any moment.

As many months went by of working with the china twigs I found that although I was attracted to preserving the china twigs 'wholeness' at the same time I was becoming increasingly annoyed by needing to be so careful with them. It didn't affect me in the beginning; it was only after several months of working with the twigs that I noticed my patience wearing thin. It became a relief to deal with the broken ones which I could treat roughly without worrying about damage. Having said this, at every stage of the process I have enjoyed taking risks with the 'whole' ones to the point of almost deliberately manhandling them. In her book *Risk* Deborah Lupton (2013: 211) notes the pleasure experienced in taking risks whilst still feeling in control. As I became more adept in handling the unfired china twigs I started to pick up a couple in each hand rather than moving them one at a time. The feeling of dexterity as I learnt to know the limits of the china and for my hands to respond to this made me feel masterful. This progressed until at one point I tried to carry six or seven particularly fragile unfired twigs in one go. I knew this was too many to carry at one time and there was no reason to do this but it was tedious carrying twigs individually. It was exciting to feel the mass of fragile forms in my hands and to have to really concentrate on handling them so carefully. There is an enjoyment in pushing the limits with them, in courting disaster. Maybe pushing the limits of handling the twigs is a way of overcoming the increasing annoyance in having to be so careful all the time.

The quality I was searching for in breaking the coke can sculptures but which I did not achieve is present in carrying the twigs. Perhaps damage is not the most important element; could it be this sense of risk that was missing before?

The broken coke can sculptures never worked because they missed risk and the threat of annihilation. My initial dissatisfaction with them had been the inauthenticity of the 'wholeness' but even after damaging them I did not feel I had escaped this aesthetics or structure. I was seeking this sense of threat to the entire structure, of risk. Bone china contains the risk of complete annihilation in its propensity to shatter. This started with my risking shattering the few twigs as I carried then and became much more evident as I started working on a larger scale to glaze twigs together in sections to create walls of china precariously balanced for *fragility*.

Whilst creating *fragility* I had great difficulty assembling the sections. At first they would break as I lifted them out of the kiln. As I lifted them I could feel the sections flex slightly so I was ready for them to shatter. They never dropped far, just back onto the kiln shelf or would shatter as I lent them against the wall, so the sound was melodic, more of a 'ting' than a crash. This was very different to breaking them whilst building the wall sections since these would initially stand and then whilst my back was turned they would shift very slightly causing them to crash. Each time was completely unexpected and entire sections of wall would crash to the ground from several feet high, one part often taking another down with it. I never got used to this unexpected crashing. The sound of china breaking is much louder than I expected it would be; it could literally be heard throughout the building across several floors. The first time it virtually made me physically jump from the shock and sent a sense of impending doom through me. This response was so immediate that it occurred before my rational brain kicked in. The adrenaline kept me continually on edge dealing with the china. I was always expecting the unexpected, yet each time they crashed it was still unexpected.



I found that the walls only work when I make them so tall and the walkways so narrow that people are in very close proximity to them. This increases the risk of knocking them over and breaking them; the risk has to be very real. The working process of my twigs has been about risk; how many I can carry, how thin I can make them, how tall I can make the walls. This reminds me of the risks I enjoy in mountain biking; the risk makes me focus intently on the outside world, creating an expansive sense where I am a part of the world. As I float over jumps on my bike I feel electric, powerful, graceful and in control. The risk adds a sense of presentness and awareness of the fragility and preciousness of what is now.

Prior to injury my work had felt congealed and static. Early attempts during my PhD to explain my artwork in writing had tied it down. The tension between experiences of injury and risk taking enabled my artwork to move forwards again and come back to life. Further sections of this exposition look into understanding these two states with the aim of shedding further light on their relationship to my art making. Making art is perceived as being synonymous with risk. In *The Aesthetics of Risk* Jane Blocker observes that artists are seen as born risk-takers and risk-taking 'has become synonymous with innovation, daring, exploration, ground breaking…' (2008: 191). Blocker notes that discourse around art of the 1960 and 70s focuses on an obsession with risk be it 'physical, political, economic, artistic, intellectual, social, and civic risks' (2008: 194). She proposes this as art's desire to engage with everyday life.

There are varying theories about a contemporary risk society but these are commonly based around increasing uncertainty over knowledge and an increasing emphasis on human ability to assess and avoid risks. Anthony Giddens' proposes;

> [T]he Enlightenment project of replacing arbitrary tradition and speculative claims of knowledge with the certainty of reason proved essentially flawed. The reflexivity of modernity operates, not in a situation of greater and greater certainty, but in one of methodological doubt. Even the most reliable authorities can be trusted only 'until further notice" (2000: 257).

Although in risk-assessing we tend to seek increasing predictability and control, the rise of extreme sports simultaneously suggests increase in risk-taking. In her book 'Risk' Deborah Lupton (2013: 211) notes that this voluntary risk-taking, 'may not simply involve physical risk-taking, such as participating in extreme sports, but can also include taking creative risks as an artist or performer'. The following sections of this exposition seek to understand this further.

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biking and breaking

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