

## The Middle Voice

**Caroline Achaintre, Anna Higgins, Niamh O'Malley, Aimée Parrott, Stephen Polatch**

The exhibition takes its title from a term in grammar which exists beyond a familiar distinction between the active and passive voices. Although the middle voice is not formally marked in English (as it is in classical Greek and Sanskrit) it is present in our language and allows to map out a multi-specied agency, away from a human-centric assumption of mankind as 'actors' in an 'inert' natural environment. Evident in such verbs as 'observe', 'witness' or 'partake', middle voice suggests an efficacy that both receives and twists. That is, middle voice denotes actions where the subject is not anterior to the field of action, coming before it takes place, but rather *interior* to it, inextricably part of the way in which it unfolds (another example in modern language is 'je suis n', 'I am born'). Distinct from an inherent hierarchy between an 'agent' and 'patient' characteristic of active and passive voices, middle-voiced expression thus acknowledges the profound entanglement of human and non-human, the simultaneity of acting and being acted upon in the world.

Bringing together works by **Caroline Achaintre, Anna Higgins, Niamh O'Malley, Aimée Parrott, Stephen Polatch**, the exhibition explores the possibility of expressing a middle-voiced view in visual terms – locating the ineffable sense of push/pull with the external world, felt in materials, mark-making process, or in the presence of the work in space.

Executed from thin slabs of clay, **Caroline Achaintre's** ceramic sculptures appear to rise, ripple and coil into three-dimensional forms, as if animated by a presence. Gently bending partially dry sheets of clay, the artist is led by its physical properties, continually negotiating and responding to the inherent malleability and brittleness. In each work Achaintre impresses the surface with patterns evocative of tree barks, shells or animal skin, constructing a sense of a porous, moist, breathing being. At once seductive and strange, the glistening curves of her sculptures lock our gaze, creating an anticipation of motion and exchange.

Painstakingly building his compositions by layering contrasting marks, **Stephen Polatch** flexes the scale and momentum of each object, creating a sense of equivalence between the human and non-human. Inhabiting familiar cityscapes, his figures are manifestly in mysterious interdependence with their surroundings, on par with plants, architecture and bodies of water. In *Tulips*, a flower towers over and rhymes with the bending figure, underscored by concealed letters spelling out 'tulips' along the bottom of the composition. Each object here appears in motion, dissolving our conceptions of causation and what constitutes an 'actor' in space.

**Aimée Parrott** works into unprimed support, interweaving dyeing, mark-making and stitching together of multiple canvases, to imbue the surface with a living, membrane-like quality. Fusing sinuous lines with staccato pointillist mark-making, the works tie in suggestions of micro and macro, cellular processes, sea organisms or landscapes seen from afar, often projecting a sense of pulsating expansion. Employing monotype technique as a starting point in her compositions, Parrott balances free gestures with a lack of complete control; she says, “in beginning a painting I like to imagine just enabling it to arrive, being receptive to materials and circumstance almost like a conduit.”

In **Niamh O’Malley’s** considered sculptures in wood, stone, metal and glass, one encounters a lure of the familiar and an impulse for touch. Warm curving surfaces combine with lucid planes and right angles, highlighting the power of materials to shift our experience of safety, communality and belonging, both in private and public spaces. Comprising a banister-like form adjacent to a delicate composition in glass and wood, *Blind* (2023) inflects our movement, drawing us in yet physically resisting a close encounter. O’Malley’s glass works at once admit and refract light, responding to and transforming the space around them, slowly revealing the modes of seeing along and through the translucent surface.

Layering fields of colour with silhouettes and shadows of familiar objects, **Anna Higgins’** cinematic works seem lit from within, evoking shapes experienced after looking at the sun or discerned in dimming light. In *Night*, the outlines of leaves and tree branches come in and out of focus upon extended looking, oscillating between recognition and doubt, and thus probing the veracity of human vision. Iterating marks in watercolour and chalk pastel with photographic transfers and waves of light captured through the lens, Higgins works intuitively, seeking to step beyond the rational towards the ‘felt’, conjuring a sense of affect and mysticism in natural forms.