

An Excerpt of Exchange

Ruby: Can you speak about the title *nothing, everything*? Where did it come from?

Sharna: There are a few reasons why I landed at *nothing, everything*. The seed was first planted with my reading of Eva Hesse, where she speaks about all these ideas of her work, that it's nothing, everything. She describes the work being not this, not that, but she was wanting to get to something, to a total other reference point. But what it was, was kind of unlocatable in a sense. So, she kind of planted the use of the words nothing, everything, and that's where it began for me. We are nothing in terms of our self but also in a body as well. You've mentioned it in your work *Lung Water*, in that we are just atoms and atoms are nothing. I also think the idea of nothing, everything continues and there is not really an ending to it. I think that's what I'm really interested in. I guess I'll call it a space between or maybe not between, just this space that is there. We can't quite reach it, we can't quite locate it, but it is there. I don't think we can locate it because I don't think there's an actual arrival point and I think that's the point, and that maybe it's a search for meaning of ourselves in this world and perhaps there is no meaning.

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R: Potentially, there is a really rich paradox in a work that looks at the fiction of 'self' and yet pursues the research of that fiction using 'self' as a starting point or as the

orientation point. So, I'm curious... I think the paradox that sits in that place is a really transformative one because it's this tension between having to start somewhere and so starting with the immediate but also the immediate as a very time bound place to start.

...I'm curious to come to this idea of time that it is in your practice- whether it be methodologies or a conceptual influence- and how that affects some of your key ideas. But, first, I'm wondering if you can talk to the materials that are in this exhibition. How long have you been working with them and why these materials?

S: This show is centred on the use of paper. I use quite a different array of materials, and for a while I was using calico and canvas as a starting point. I then looked to more malleable materials, and the way the material reacts and the potentials of them to speak to these ideas. I landed on paper for that I could roll it, fold it a lot more smoothly than I could the canvas or calico. The calico just keeps wanting to flap out in a sense, it's heavier. With the paper if you scrunch it, it kind of holds its shape a bit more which is really playful — but also that the way I could manipulate the paper a little more. So, I could begin with a cheap and low-quality paper that I could layer with paint, layer with texture, that then takes on a whole new quality. The possibility with paper is exciting and endless, and the range of paper too. So that is what this show touches on, where I've incorporated new paper, such as tracing paper because I wanted to start to get more translucent. I thought that was important to do because of the exploration of boundaries, and the idea of how we are

relating to everything that in a sense suggests there is no boundary, or that the boundary is where we make it. So that is why I wanted to incorporate a more translucent material that shows that the boundary is unclear as well. The tracing paper has this rich texture to it, that 'scrunchy-ness' that I was talking about, you can scrunch it and it will just stay, well not forever, but it will stay for a little bit which has enabled me to form it into ways in correspondence to my body that has those relationships that I'm interested in. It's not that the material is equal to the body but that it acts, in a way, as a signifier for it.

R: It is interesting that you have chosen a material that exhibits memory essentially. It retains the memory of the physical influences that shape it. It is also very interesting that you mention they [those memories] also fade. Whilst it [the paper] has the potential to hold shape and be shaped by its environment, there is also a time-based element to it that's not forever — that it doesn't take that particular form forever. There is a really interesting mirroring there between the fold, time, and gravity taking effect whilst simultaneously it is also unfolding imperceptibly. And shape wise, you're working with folds quite often, and how evocative that is of the body, and the internal. It is really interesting to think about how movement becomes so present in your work when you are situating it in that 3D context...As I am hearing you speak, I am realising how active your work is. It is just operating on a really different time signature to me as a witness when I'm moving around it. Or even if I visit it in four months' time, that rate of change is just happening in a way I don't always pay attention to, which I guess is the same as the body—in

the sense that the body keeps the score [and] you don't realise you are a different person five years after the fact, until it is five years after the fact.

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R: How do you decide what *not* to include? The material itself and the works are evocative of the body but primarily flesh and skin are the biggest associations I make. So part of what is *not* there is teeth, hair, nails, and saliva. In a few of the works, those flesh-like and skin-like elements are really separate from structure. Rather they lean on architecture or floor — the uprightness of them is from their relationship to the external. And that became really clear in a way that I hadn't quite clocked in your work previously. Even when there is a structural element- as in the work *a part of it, within it* where they are evocative of bone, for example, but there is also an ambivalence or a non-necessity to their functionality. It is very besides the matter. I'm curious about the parts of the body- like you don't use nails and hair- in those parts of the body that you *are* using, why those components of 'self' and identity are the interesting one's for you?

S: Firstly, I arrived at skin because that is what I was using as that marker of relation for my body and the world, as in it feels like that is where the seepage is in my relation. So that is how I begun using the skin. It also became a rich signifier for me in a visual sense, where paper could stand in for skin in a way that I was able to fold them and roll them in the same way you could if you were to pull off your skin. That whole malleability of the body, of paper. I

also feel that there are less additional signifiers that are jumping on top of that. So, if I was to use hair and nails, I feel like I would be starting to have a different conversation and I don't know if that would continue to come to these ideas or porous nature that I am interested in. I feel like it would start to have other connotations that I may or may not want to have — and that is not to say I wouldn't use them in the future. And if you actually look very carefully there is a lot of hair in my work. [laughter]. I shred. There is actually a lot in there it is just not in an obvious or direct sense, more in the excess or remnants of my body falling into the work.

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R: Was there ever a point when you considered calling it *everything, nothing*, and would that change things drastically for you?

S: No, I don't think it would change anything drastically, but I did sit there for a quite a while, flipping them backward and forward. I think a part of me put it *nothing, everything* because it seemed and felt like it flowed smoother off my lips. Also, because sitting it that way it gave more of a possibility at the ending, rather than if you put it *everything, nothing* you are kind of finishing it, and I don't want that finish point. By having it *nothing, everything*, it allows that growth, allows it to go somewhere else.



Image: 'a part of it, within it' (detail), 2022, paper, latex, paint, wire, Photo by Jax Oliver

This text is an excerpt from 'In conversation: nothing, everything' with Ruby Donohoe and Sharna Barker.

The full transcript is available on Sharna's website www.sharnabarker.com

Sharna Barker is a visual artist predominately based in painting and sculpture. Her practice is centered on the body/self led by concepts of embodiment such as empathy, relationality, and reflexivity. She is based in Brisbane/Meenjin. Instagram | @sharna.a.barker

Ruby Donohoe (she/her) is an interdisciplinary performance-maker and epileptic dancer who wrestles with the body. Based on Kabi Kabi country, Ruby's works are rooted in the politics of encounter and defiant acts of sensitisation to centre the body as a performance site. www.rubydonohoe.com | @rubybridgetdonohoe

Ruby and Sharna have also collaborated on a project entitled *Porous*, which will be shown at Grey Street Gallery QCA in May.

Sharna Barker | *nothing, everything* | 18-19th March 2022 | Sure Studio