

In Conversation: nothing, everything

Ruby Donohoe and Sharna Barker

Ruby: Maybe we'll start at the beginning. 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.

I think that's kind of where I'm arriving because we continue shifting. For example, the person who I was 20 years ago is not who I am now and even the person who I was five years ago is not who I am now. So, these ideas of identity aren't bounded — they are continuously moving, continuously growing, continuously shifting into the next thing that is unlocatable in that way because it doesn't stop. And then *now* is not the end point, for I'm only at the beginning, like I'm always at the beginning.

R: To me, it sounds like in this pursuit of meaning- and arriving at this point of a non-locatable meaning or 'essential' material- you've turned to identity and you've looked at 'self'. I'm curious about whether that was an organic and intuitive place to start the research or whether you began this kind of research elsewhere and then arrived at 'self' or identity as the site to kind of look at all of these ideas or whether that was something that came later?

S: No, my practice has always been centered on the self and body and based on my own individual lived experiences. So that's where I continue to come back to because that's how this all began. Like I can only ever know the world through myself and through my own experiences.

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.

To kind of loop a little more back to the title, 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 awhile, 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.

R: 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 centered 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 canvas 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.

I'm curious to hear you talk about the use of paper and its relationship to the body.

S: Yes, when I'm sourcing materials there has to be a resonating quality that I feel through my body. When you come across a material and you immediately resonate with it, as in, yes! there is something so juicy and yummy about that. So that is kind of how I begin and I'm also on the hunt for it visually signifying the body too, so that is why I keep coming back to flesh tones because I am wanting to keep those signifiers there. I am calling these self-portraits. I haven't let go of it yet and I have questioned it many times whether to let go

of the flesh tone as signifier. I guess I am interested in asking what is the signifier, which is probably a better way to describe where I am at —because it is how you are recognising the body in the work, and what is that point of recognition? So, when you are obscuring the body from a very explicit and defined representation of someone existing in the world, such as myself as artist, and I am obscuring that fact then how are you recognising the body in those works? This is what I think I am really interested in, and I don't know if that has a really definite ending or way of describing that either. And that is I guess, what I am trying to do in the works — explore that intersection or explore that point. So, it becomes an exploration of what is a signifier and that point of recognition and that point of relation.

R: How do you see the role of the signifier having a literal element or as a descriptor and also that obstruction of the literal that you mention? What do you see the role of estrangement in terms of, like, the witness' experiences of your work? What is the importance or interest for you in delaying recognition?

S: For me it really important for the viewer's participation with the work, and in that relationship, I am not trying to completely dissolve meaning or reference to me as artist, but that I am wanting this interplay of keeping somewhat of that there but giving the viewer quite a lot of significance and participation in their interaction with the work — so that in a way they are moving through what I am moving through. There is a separation, a delay in our movements, but we meet through the work. So, it is how I am moving through the world, not based in what I look like — which is the base idea of how I am coming at the self-portrait. This is how I am moving and recognising through the world and I am hoping for the viewer to experience that as they move through the work too. In order for me to do that, less is more, so you have to give the viewer more space for them to have more of an imagination, more of an experience — you have to leave gaps in order for them to fill them

in. If you give everyone everything, that is an ending. It comes back to that idea of where is the beginning and where is the end, and for me I don't want there to be an ending because personally I don't think there is one. There shouldn't be a location point, and I guess that is what I am trying to do in that relationship, giving something but not giving everything. And I think that is important to do and I am curious in the ways that speaks to the ways the body carries memory and the ways our bodies are that navigation point of past, present, and future; and that they do collide continuously. We are carrying moments with us of past experiences and carry how they are surfacing in the body, how we are processing them and how that feeds into that next experience — which then becomes a beginning for the next experience in the way that we carry it into the next thing.

R: I am curious as to whether or not you consider 'other' within your work and the ways you might do so. In terms of when you go to situate it [the art] or during the making of it. I wonder whether 'self' is the place you excavate from to find 'other' to once again find 'self'? What is the role of 'other' in your thinking or has there been a newer understanding of it that has unfolded through your practice? As in, when you are looking at portraiture the idea of 'other' is inseparable, no?

S: My interest with the self/other relationship where recognition plays out, is that when the viewer is coming to the work, they are not recognising me per se, but they are in a sense recognising themselves, recognising their corporeality. 'self' and 'other' aren't opposing positions, they dissolve into one another, so I am conscious to have a continuous play with the artist and viewer. I am very attentive to the viewer's relationship with the work, and the shifting nature of agency, and that shifting nature of the 'I'. So the role of 'other' is always there. Simply in the way that I am always aware of you and your relationship to me in order for me to be self — as in

the basis of subjectivity in psychoanalysis — but also that my relationship with you feeds into my understanding of myself continuously throughout my life too. That is what I am really interested in terms of where boundaries end and relations come in, where social interaction shapes identification. So 'self' and 'other' are the investigation. Maybe I'm not sure how to answer it because it is so inherent in it — it is in a sense.

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 began 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.

R: You've mentioned you are the artist- you are the orientation point, the creation of the work, and site of investigation. From the outside, my perception is there is an absence of autobiographical material. The crumbs of the signifiers are very much around materiality. So, I am curious whether that context is a deliberate thing that you are not particularly interested in.

S: I think that comes back to how I mentioned not using nails and hair as that would start bringing in other connotations and start having different conversations that maybe I don't want to have. But I would also say that this is hugely autobiographical, this is marking my existence, this is marking how I move, how I interact, how each moment seeps into my sense of self and my interactions and responses, and how I am processing that — all of that is what comes out in the work. But maybe it is a question of what is the structure of autobiography? Does it have to be in this traditional linear narrative, maybe there isn't a linear structure to life. Or maybe it is a lack of description, it is the lack of giving you the viewer things to hold onto and locate. That I am kind of suspending you in that process by not giving you all that descriptive information.

R: How do you define autobiographical?

S: I guess that is what I am curious in exploring. Perhaps I am only aware of that now as I am speaking with you. When you asked me about

autobiography, it is, but the questions may be what structure it is. Perhaps I consider autobiography as what is left over, what stays with us, in the body. And for me that can be quite blurry and unsettled. It is quite fragmentary.

R: So, in terms of structure do you think autobiography has contents? As a structure that holds its content, do you see certain materials that are innately autobiographical?

S: I guess if you think found objects for example, they feel like they have this closer connection to locating a definitive past event and a memory.

R: Situational context?

S: Yes. I think it comes back to how we began, that I am wanting to suspend locating that. So, when you walk in as viewer and see a found object that is part of someone's life, part of their personhood and identity, I find it an easy form of recognition. That we easily locate and place that or perhaps you move on from it a little faster... So, for example, today, with all the mask wearing it is hard to place someone because with the masks on their face, it obscures so you don't place who they are quite as easily, but there are other signifiers that help us locate who they are. Such as clothing, their walk, a tattoo. Especially when we don't really know them well enough to call that out earlier. That obscuring slows down that process of being able to place them, but you have this desire to do so, this urge to place something or someone. Well, I do anyway, I guess I can only speak for myself. And maybe that is where my work comes back to is that desire and urge and need to place something in order to understand it.

R: Its origin, or to know how to relate to it?

S: Yes. And I guess I am interested in the works of not giving you that.

R: Do you have a taste or can you sniff out the reason as to why that is interesting to you? What do you think happens in that moment where delayed recognition takes place? So, for example, I'll explain my experience of your work. I also feel that urge to locate - to contextualise - in order to know how to relate to it. So, I'll do that in a physical plane in terms of the gallery — I'll engage in the gravity of it, its physical situation. I definitely form a language-based relationship with the folds, I use them to refer to the internal or the feminine experience. That is something that is programmed in me that drops in very fast that then becomes a lens that I then view the work from. And then- in lieu of other contextual clues that you offer or withhold- I also look at the palette you use and the conversation of race comes up.

So, it's interesting that as an artist you try to strip back all those signifiers that help you contextualise. Ultimately, in order to understand how to interrelate.

In hearing you speak, it is making me realise how active- despite my initial experiences of your work being mostly visceral, embodied ones... In hearing you speak, it is making me aware of how fast the brain and its systems leap toward culture and go ransacking and hijacking the work for culture signifiers. Ultimately to find, I guess, probably what it is inclined to find regardless of 'you' the artist's intentions? And that it [the brain] will mine what it often relies upon to see, what is most comfortable, or most used to seeing, or most interested in seeing. I wonder if you can speak to the context of the witness, and your interest in that delay? What transpires between non-recognition and recognition or whether recognition ever occurs? What appeals to you in that space that you try to carve out by your transformation of time?

S: In delaying or obscuring recognition, I am interested that it might perhaps actually force, encourage, or invite you or move you to find an alternative path. That in stopping what is 'normal' enables a new creation, like a roadblock forcing you to take new direction. Or even perhaps that destruction enables new growth and is then an attractive method in starting fresh. It is the possibilities that I am interested in, that what we are presented with isn't the only way, that there are many possibilities to many different things, and I think the ways we are relating and recognising with each other is just one of them. Perhaps in doing so we can accommodate for difference and can accommodate for a non-universal subject. In the work, I am interested in both asserting and cancelling difference- for instance how this is discussed with Eva Hesse's work in regard to gender. I am curious in exploring modes of relation that stems from those very early stages of life, say in a quite instinctual and embodied sense, and that also perhaps brings us closer together. So those ways that we are moving through the world as in the ways our bodies process, store, the way our body moves, folds and falls, and the way the body has this urge of desire. Maybe quite simply a desire for love, a desire for connection, a desire to comprehend. Maybe that is why my practice, I thought, has been a search for meaning, or actually *erasing* meaning from a lot of events that have happened in my life. That maybe the way I carry those is where I am trying to place the meaning, and that I can possibly release that.

R: Yes, ok, this is personal. At the end of *Lung Water* Part III, I was holding this ice that had shrunk from something that I couldn't even push. Like it was this big, big block and then, by the end of it, it was quite small. I was just in adrenaline mode. It had been 2 hours and everyone had left except me and the videographer and I said "I think it's done". We hadn't spoken for ages- for hours- and then I just knew. I was like 'It is done" and he said "I think you can let go of it now". I don't have a very established relationship with this person- we're quite new to one another- but in this moment of shared engagement

with the material.... because that is what we were really doing, we were both tending to ice and water and our two bodies and that's it and having shared context, this person was able to see me very clearly and very literally. I was speaking in literal terms [about the ice] but the autobiographical had been projected onto me [by the videographer in an emotive way] and it just so happened to resonate. So it felt like 'truth'. Like he was making a broader statement - you have done what you came to do and, now, it is time to let it go. It was a really interesting intersection of the perceived, the articulation of the perceived, the experience of the perceived, and just the experience, all kind of meeting in a way that rhymed enough for it to feel like 'truth'....

Someone has just seen something about me that had leaked from my body that I didn't even realise existed or necessarily give permission to be perceived or perhaps even realised myself. When he said it, it made it 'true' because I received it. I received the perception of it. It just so happened to line up in a way. Regardless of any other context that he may or may not have known about. In some ways, it made 'context' arrive 'at' me. It is interesting how 'context' can influence material, or autobiography. Or even the other way too, the materiality can situate you.

S: Absolutely. That is a great description of the ideas of boundaries and relations that we have with 'self' and 'other'. And that relationship of 'self' and 'other' is not just between humans, but also humans and the environment and with physical material objects. I influence it or them just as much as they influence me, and that is a continuous cycle of exchange that doesn't settle.

R: What do you consider when you situate your works? So, installing them, choosing which collections belong to which, the ways in which the individual works come together and relate best, and how you situate them in a gallery space etc. What are some of those considerations?

S: I am attentive to the works and the body's relationship to space. So, the way the viewer navigates space helps me lead those decisions. I'm asking how the viewer will move through the space and work to continue those questions and explorations I've done in the work in the studio. So how can that experience of the works hanging in a gallery continue those ideas.

R: Is there a particular spatial relationship or movement relationship that you keep coming back to between the viewer and the work?

S: I've played with in other works, and I have come back to again in this exhibition where there is a body-to-body relationship as another signifier. As in, the shape and scale, and also in how it is hung, or it falls that resembles the body, so the viewer can feel the weight or weightlessness in how they are approaching the work. And then of course visually it needs to be balanced compositionally, so attentive to those formal aspects are really important when grouping works and the layout of them in the space. I also want dialogues between the works too, so I give them characters in a way and am curious how one may reach their 'arm' out to another, and that there are tiny markers of relationships. Like they are little characters having little dialogues with each other.

R: It is so interesting to talk to different artists about their ideas of compositional resolution. Like, when is a piece finished? I am curious whether you can speak to certain ingredients or certain dynamics that make for more interesting dialogues between pieces? Have you found that there are certain patterns which make for more or less interesting conversations between your works? I imagine, maybe there are two works that are very interesting together and I am curious to hear your thoughts on why? Or instead where works side-by-side, the conversation is more mute? Is there anything you

have discovered in this exhibition about how works share language? What dialogues are of most interest to you?

S: I'm not sure how to answer this. There really is no pre-empting of this. It is something that happens in real time for me. Perhaps that reflects what I am trying to do as whole, it is an awareness. The awareness of the body, the awareness of the relationships, how we are reacting to things. So not trying to control it as such, just an awareness. Not trying to have a big meaning to it, just an awareness. And I think I take that through to the works in the dialogues I'm wanting to create from one to the next. It is being aware and attentive to those relationships when they surface, not trying to make them surface. So that is the same in the installation, even though I have a plan of attack, everything can change when you get in there. Because I know that those relationships that I am trying to encourage, that they can happen at that time, not always previously.

R: In your recent installation, you are playing much more with shadow. So there is a compositional and spatial element, and the topography of the body as it moves through space, and there is this kind of underlying tension in the time relationship that is embedded in the materials and this unfolding that is happening. There is a sense of 'after' in your work. As in: something has arrived here, a sense of displacement, a separation from origin, which I think is speaking to the experiential that you are trying to create. But with the shadow as well, there is this really pronounced conversation with time that only light can really speak to. The relationship with light, shadow, and time is really immediate in a way that is not necessarily possible otherwise. It is like a real shortcut to understanding the passing of time. What is it about shadow that interests you and how do you deal with a shadow that moves?

S: With the shadow I am interested in it being fixed and not fixed, because you put it in place and it is quite definitive in certain areas, it isn't always though. What I was playing with in the studio is having multiple lights on so that the shadow wasn't such a stark contrast which feels more definitive. Having an overhead light on and spotlights on the works there was a softening to the shadow that made it there but not quite there — it feels less definitive then. And that it also gives the work an extension too, so the work doesn't end. Which comes back to that endless type character that I am interested in, where the boundary of the work is not clear. The shadow may change depending on the day too, so that the change from day to night might alter its effects.

R: My last question, is there something that you have come to know through this particular process that you previously didn't?

S: I don't know if this is just this body of work and exhibition but in a sense I feel like with each work you get closer to an understanding of these things and whether or not I can grip that to these works I'm not sure. But it has come clearer to me that what I am interested in is that suspension, of not giving that location or end point.

R: Is there something that has become increasingly clear that you *don't* know?

S: My first instinct and urge is to say, everything! *[laughter]* There feels like there is so much more that comes up than I answer. So, each time I do a work or work through some ideas, it feels like that is in itself, endless. So, when I feel like I am getting a grasp of something, I do, but it also poses more questions than answers. But I don't think that is a bad thing.

R: Not at all. Is there a question you have been gifted for next time?

S: I think what is being more prevalent in the works is what the signifier is for me and what does recognition mean, or how are we placing recognition?

R: Hmmmm.... How are we placing recognition? Beautiful.

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This conversation is in response to Sharna's solo exhibition, *nothing, everything*. Ruby and Sharna have also collaborated on a project entitled *Porous*.

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/Meanjin.

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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.

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