



The Weight of Things
Rebecca Steedman
RM Gallery and Project Space
June, 2020

“The Weight of Things”

As I take in this phrase, it sounds a reminder that life can get heavy. I think of how our day-to-day tasks sometimes become a sluggish trek, as we forge our way through the world under the burdens we each carry.

The work of Rebecca Steedman subverts this reading immediately, and delightfully. *The Weight of Things* is steeped in tender humour and absurdity. The gallery is lined with a family of precarious material assemblages: dropped ceramic forms, wood-fired hooks and fixtures, poly boxes, wooden doweling, planks, and lengths of cord.

There is a language of utility here. Electric orange, blue timber, and ropen elements speak of road works, construction signage, or trips to Bunnings – tying wood to the back of a trailer and demarking its length with a fluoro orange flag. Yet this useful feeling is undercut by the delicacy of Steedman’s hand – cords loop softly against the wall, their utilitarian nature turned towards linear poetics. Hooks and wall fixtures, in lush salt-glazed browns, seem to have a job to do, but they too are involved in this game of non-use, of being just to be.

A breed of absurdist alchemy threads its way through *The Weight of Things*. Elements that pepper the grind of the daily, our roads, hardware stores and homes, are made new, liberated from task or chore. Ubiquitous familiarity is squashed, unwound, made light and free. Such a feeling is most concentrated in the series of ceramic domestic wares that have met with gravity. Wheel-thrown and then dropped while wet, these vases, bowls, beakers and cups measure the flattening impact of RM gallery’s ceiling height, and the distance from the windows of the space to the driveway below.

I smile when I picture Steedman leaning out the gallery windows and releasing these forms, letting them fall two stories through the open air, and hearing her pots thwack quietly on concrete. The resulting objects, fired and glazed, have a dynamic liveliness, hilarity, and a deflated anthropomorphism. They manage to be simultaneously funny and touching; ‘Poor silly old vase’, we can

giggle, while feeling sympathetic to its suffering. These objects spark empathy and compassion in their loss of purpose, their succumbing to the weight of the world.

Alongside evoking a layered emotive response, Steedman’s dropped forms effortlessly communicate the physical qualities of clay, its wetness and squishiness, its ability to record action and accident, hand and surface. There is an energetic immediacy to her ceramic pieces – a quality often lost in purposeful domestic ware. These objects are frozen in flux; still deflating and burping, appearing ever-ready to be pounded onto the wedging table and re-thrown.

The slumpen-ness of Steedman’s ceramics is here a result of intentional action; dropping, falling. Yet, for me, they also point towards a moment well known by all wheel-throwers; a newly thrown piece isn’t working, and in the space of a breath, hand follows damning thought – the form is squashed, smushed, irrevocably marked a non-starter.

There is beauty and humour in such failure. I share a ceramics studio with Steedman, and four other makers.

On my walks back and forth past other people’s work areas, I will often spot a wet squished pot; a crumpled cup, or strangled would-be vase. After seeing *The Weight of Things*, I can’t help but look at these rejected objects with a renewed delight, and think ‘Oh, there’s a Rebecca Steedman.’

Far from a nod towards the heaviness of living, Steedman’s exhibition is a reminder not to take things too seriously.

With a light hand, her work encourages us to pry open the lid of purposeful function, and see that just beneath the surface of sensible, material things, we may find a boundless silliness and levity.

Text by Becky Richards

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