

Focus Studio Visit: Caroline Achaintre

Theatrical textiles and characters in clay

Caroline Achaintre's studio in east London is in a purpose-built complex on a stretch of green belt between Hackney and the city's Olympic Park. Each sunlit studio wall introduces me to different aspects of the artist's work. We mosey around the room together, leafing through watercolours, picking up ceramics, inspecting her tufted wool works and scrutinizing gallery plans for future exhibitions. Our conversation progresses from specific pieces to her diverse inspirations, many of which come from different pockets of 20th-century design.

Along the white wall opposite the door are pinned a cluster of drawings, sketches and photocopied images. Individually, the pictures are ambiguous but their collective effect is bright and exuberant. They are the starting points for several new works by this French/German artist that, in their finished form, will combine the virtuosity of a Bauhaus pioneer, the audacious thrust of postmodern design and the punch and bawdiness of a carnival costumier. In preparatory sketches, parallel and crosshatched lines of coloured marker pen on paper make patterned rounds with clear outlines, occasionally broken up by frenzied scribbles. These preparatory shapes have been distilled from images found in books of now-outmoded fashions and the European carnival tradition. One photograph, pinned between her drawings, shows a person in a costume of thick, hanging ropes, face obscured, like some otherworldly creature emerging from a swampy phantasmagoria. The costumes or disguises that fascinate Achaintre are often oversized, melodramatic and faintly absurd hybrids of man and animal. Borrowing brazen colours, dramatic textures and disruptive patterning from their sources, these drawings are reanimated by Achaintre into new figures in watercolour, clay, furniture or fabric. It is this transition from source images, in which living forms become dramatic abstractions, that results in the extraordinary quality of the artist's figures, which are simultaneously illusionistic and intensely present. This tenuous balance reappears consistently through Achaintre's works, which she refers to as characters. While her compositions or installations are, strictly speaking, non-narrative, displayed together they resemble troupes of gregarious actors caught mid-improvisation.

About this article

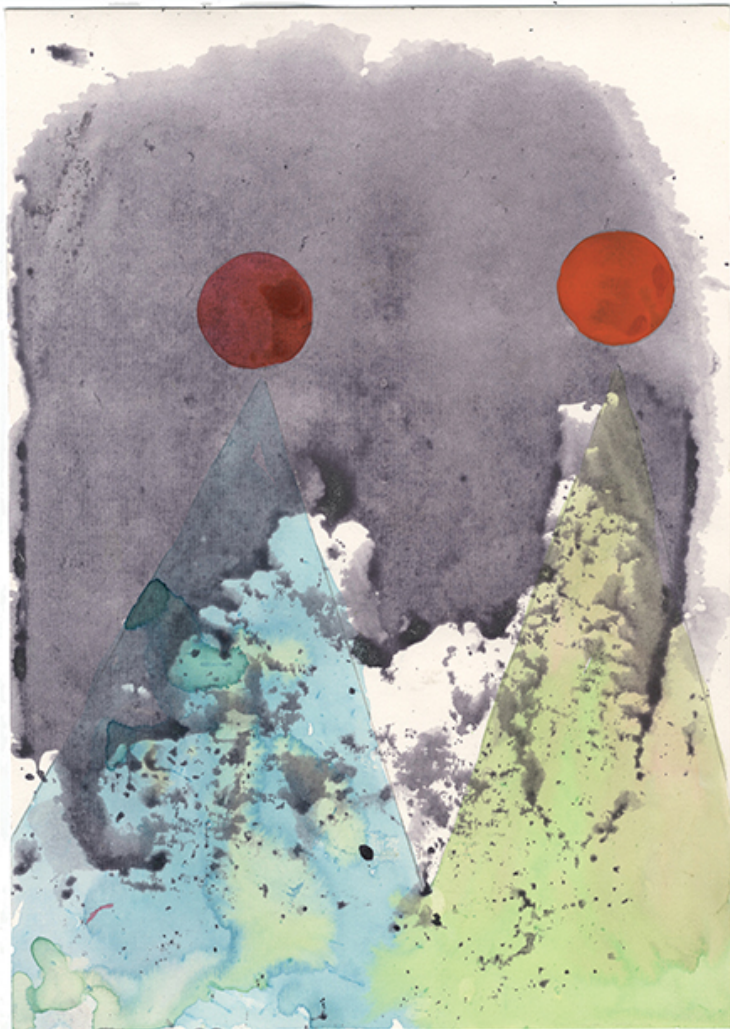
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By Isobel Harbison



Birdsssss, 2013, hand-tufted wool, 5 × 3.9 m. Courtesy: the artist and Smiths Row, Bury St Edmunds; photograph: Doug Atfield

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Mooner, 2014, ink on paper, 30 × 21 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Arcade, London

Pinned beside the sketches are some images of Achaintre's recent clay works, which resemble human heads clad in the surreal armour of carnival masks. *Temp Mint* (2013) is an oblong piece rounded at both ends and made to hang vertically like a long face, with two slits for eyes cut close together beneath a deep brow created by an overhanging fold. Another exaggerated horizontal fold lower down suggests ageing human jowls – the careful tucks are modelled with the sharp eye of a fine cartoonist. *Temp Mint* is a funny work if your humour is deadpan: painted in back and white verticals, its serious expression is emphasized but also undermined by the droll patterning of a jester or clown's striped fabric.

In her 2012 installation at Eastside Projects, Birmingham, the design of one plinth was borrowed from the Memphis Group's early 1980s cabinets: a zigzagging shape painted white, black and lime green. Achaintre's display furniture at her 'Camp Coo' exhibition in 2013 was influenced by the rudimentary dynamics and form of Tetris pieces, the shape-shifting tetra-cubes from cult 1980s puzzle video game. These serpentine plinths ascend from the floor echoing the steady zigzag pattern that the animated tiles originally formed on the computer screen. The artist couples these two

influences – Memphis Group furniture and Tetris – as inspirational postmodern designs. They appeal to her, she explains, because the exhibition furniture provides the clean lines and modular units to counter-balance the uneven contours of her hardened clay. Also, crucially, the designs are ‘less polite’ than their austere and humourless modernist counterparts. These unusual support structures lend her clay works dynamic bodies of their own, and offer greater potential for playful choreography than the traditional, minimal plinth.

We sit down. Achaintre reaches for one of the picture books that weigh down her shelves. She flicks through a well-thumbed volume on 1980s and ’90s Russian design to find an image of a dramatic fur coat, photographed mid-flight on a fashion runway. It was made from some exotic animal pelt and extended from the model’s shoulders like the outstretched wings of a bald eagle whose feathers are on full display. *Birdsssss* (2013), one of Achaintre’s tufted pieces, is a dramatic re-creation of this stylish wingspan. Made for her UH Galleries show last year, it was suspended in the centre of the space’s high atrium, its front and back exposed. The browns and tans, greys and pinks of the tufting are plotted and woven, the broad shape funnelling and extending downwards so that the thrust is vertical, as if the piece were taking flight. Both the original bird and its extravagant fur interpretation give way to Achaintre’s new work, a site of dramatic action.



'Camp Coo', 2013, installation view, Smiths Row, Bury St Edmunds. Courtesy: the artist and Arcade, London

The beginnings of another tufted piece flanks one wall of the studio. Black threading has begun: the artist's tufting gun firing lines of it like brushstrokes through a large marked-up and stretched canvas. Achaintre crops the colours and threads as the work progresses. This is one of several such pieces planned for the artist's 'Spotlight' show at Tate Britain, which will open in October this year. She has built a to-scale model of its large neo-classical gallery, the height of which will present the most immediate challenge. She will think about the vertical thrust first – how the display architecture can elevate her rambunctious characters without breaking their momentum or flattening their fizz, and then she will consider her individual works, old and new, before fine-tuning the ensemble.

In the centre of Achaintre's studio is a cabinet storing her watercolours. Like the clay and tufted works, they are composed in sections with foreground shapes, forming face-like abstractions, which veer forward against patterned backgrounds. Their careful prismatic schemes are achieved using water-resistant gums, traces of which sometimes remain beside dried-up pools of looser, murkier colours. This is where her practice began, from where her experiments with tuft, clay and furniture developed a decade ago, with their formal contradictions, varying tempos, broken

boundaries, verve, wit and character. Her solo exhibition at Castello di Rivoli in Italy later this year will include a selection of watercolours around which she will make and arrange other pieces. Achaintre's garrulous troupe will, once again, take to the boards.

Isobel Harbison

Caroline Achaintre lives in London, UK. In 2013, she had solo shows at UH Galleries, Hatfield, UK, and Smiths Row, Bury St Edmunds, UK; her work was included in group exhibitions at Peer, London; Musee de l'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France; The New Art Gallery, Walsall, UK; La Loge, Brussels, Belgium; and MCA, Toronto, Canada. Earlier this year, Achaintre had a solo show at Arcade, London. In October, her work will be the subject of a 'Spotlight' at Tate Britain, London; and in November she will have a solo show at the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin, Italy, as part of the Illy Present Future Prize.

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