

Colin Booth in conversation with Brunno Silva

Studio Colin Booth, St. Leonards, East Sussex, UK, January / February 2019

BS: *Hi Colin, it is great to meet you here at your studio and discuss the works that will be shown in Berlin. I believe it is your first time showing in Berlin too. How do you feel about this exhibition?*

CB: Excited, I'm looking forward to putting together a number of works – old and new – which haven't been shown together before.

BS: *I believe English Air, considering purely in its form, is an interesting take. We are selecting works from your entire oeuvre, including works that you are creating now. In addition, the dimensions of the exhibition space are limited. So although the exhibition flirts with the "mid career retrospective" structure, it has a different time and space negotiation.*

CB: Yes, there is no attempt to show how my work has developed chronologically. Instead, I have chosen works which I hope will give an understanding of my working process from concept to completion. I have also attempted to give a flavour of how I work with materials.

BS: *Maybe we could go through the pieces that you are considering for the show and discuss them further? What would you like to show me first?*

CB: Let's start with the Sappho text pieces. I am considering three: *surely a sign, who is gone*, and *someone will remember us*. They are all cut onto marble and approximately the same size (30 x 30 cm). I have been working with fragments of Sappho texts for a while now, I think there is something fascinating in the way these two and half thousand year old phrases have a contemporary resonance. They are fragments from her poems, which were written on papyrus – it was common to use papyrus to wrap the corpse during mummification rituals – which is the only reason her work has survived. What I find interesting is that these fragments, accumulated over the centuries, have been attributed to Sappho by archaeologists and historians, translated by dozens of different authors to form a large body of work, some of which is of dubious authenticity.

BS: *How can they attribute it to one author? Can you tell me more about Sappho?*

CB: There is a consensus that she was a woman and some accounts indicate that she was bi-sexual, or lesbian. Historians and researchers have had to put together her story from whatever historical evidence they can find. Some of the poems which have survived are certain to be hers, through a correlation of time, place, style or subject. In fact a complete poem was recently found in Egypt in 2017 and it was possible to directly attribute it to her because the text mentions her son and a particular place where she lived. She was an extremely famous poet when she was alive, but still nothing conclusive has survived beyond these fragments of papyrus. But because it is mainly fragments that have survived, over the centuries authors have often taken licence to translate her work how they see fit, even to the extent of filling in the gaps between the existing words. *If not winter* by the American poet and Ancient Greek scholar, Anne Carson, is probably the most accurate translation of her work to-date. In her book, she shows us the poems with the empty spaces where

the words have been lost and it is this distinct, visually contemporary interpretation which drew me into her work.

BS: *So in a way you work with this half-built puzzle, break it down into a handful of words and then translate those words into a different medium. I am curious about what you decide to use, because the words here are so contemporary. Surely a sign, who is gone, someone will remember us, they are all so extremely atemporal.*

CB: I agree. I have chosen specific phrases for exactly that reason. And I have chosen to work with marble for creating the works due to its permanence and its significance within art history. I wanted to make a connection between the historical past and the contemporary present. In my practice I often collect things that have a history, sometimes known, sometimes unknown and these objects are incorporated into my work and become part of my own narrative – part of my present. In the same way, I wanted to bring these pieces by Sappho into my practice, to re-contextualize it, to bring it into the present day.

BS: *There is a great freedom for viewers to bring as much as they want to the artwork. You can see the works and the words will resonate regardless if you know about Sappho or the origin of the text. The fragments are reduced to these statements which speak directly to you.*

CB: Yes, *who is gone*, for example, can refer to anything or anyone. Maybe it could be a loved one, or maybe a friend who moved away. This permanent state of flux and fragility in which we all live is part of the human condition and so the piece has potential for various meanings and interpretations, which I like very much. It is a statement written two and a half thousand of years ago. The poet is gone, that moment of history is gone, yet it belongs in the present. *Someone will remember us* is actually part of a longer phrase that continues with 'I say, even in another time' but there wasn't enough space in the marble slab for the complete sentence. There is a nice irony here, since we clearly do remember her through these ancient fragments of text. Given that her poems were meant to be sung and not written down for posterity (otherwise they would have been carved in marble or stone) it is very unlikely she ever considered they would last through the ages.

BS: *We could discuss what constitutes memory, or being remembered. We have these texts by Sappho but, as you said before, in the past others have changed the text, filled gaps, offered spurious translations etc. Things survive, but their interpretation changes. What they mean and how we read them, it all changes. Taking this view, by isolating her words and reducing them to such a small fragment such as who is gone, it seems almost certain that Sappho did indeed put these three words one after the other. There is a certain found truth in this reduction.*

CB: I would also suggest that it is a 'poetic truth', which is perhaps why it resonates so much in the present. In a way these fragments function as a metaphor for all art, since all art is contemporary and viewed and interpreted through the present.

BS: *Yes, of course, for example, with classical marble sculptures that were originally painted but in our collective memory we see them without any trace of colour, just an immaculate, pure marble surface. Regardless that we know how they originally looked, it still seems wrong when we look at a coloured example. A technological limitation of the past has dictated the way we perceive a significant part of art history.*

CB: The same is true of paintings which have changed colour over the centuries. Nothing is ever fixed in time and everything is inevitably open to re-interpretation.

BS: *Coming back to the selection of works for Berlin, what else are you thinking to show?*

CB: I am going to include three works of my cedar book series, *How to Read Contemporary Art*, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* and *Sappho* (2016-2018). These are small bookcases containing replicas of books from my library, all of which have been made from cedar wood. They are a play on the notion of books which we collect and identify with, books which never get read and books as physical objects in their own right. I think the emergence of e-books has thrown a different light upon what it means to buy and own a physical book.

BS: *What about these* [pointing to a group of wooden blocks].

CS: They were part of a piece called *Institute of Play* (2010) which was originally commissioned by the V&A Museum of Childhood in London. In all, I produced three thousand tulip wood blocks for an installation in their main gallery. It was ten meters long and two meters high and looked like a cross between a very complex architectural model of a city and an enormous set of children's play bricks. I would like to place a number of them on a shelf within the Berlin space, but I still need to measure the available space and decide how many to bring.

BS: *So it behaves like a sculpture, but also as construction blocks.*

CB: They are site-responsive and can be re-configured. They were also shown in Newcastle during the following year at the Laing Art Gallery and more recently in Folkestone in Kent, where I used them to replace hundreds of books which lined the walls of the very popular Steep Street café in the Old Town. It is something that I often go back to, but the result is always different.

BS: *They look so perfectly made, industrially cut and perfectly painted. They take me to Minimalism but they are all made specifically for you right? It is not a reclaimed industrial object?*

CB: They were made in a furniture factory by highly skilled carpenters and painted just like you might spray paint a kitchen unit. They are all identical in size so they can be built up like kids' building blocks and be assembled in any number of different ways. That was something I intended from the start, that they could be put together in different spaces and the result would always be new. I think my roots are very much in Minimal Art. I appreciate this economy of form, using simple geometric shapes and minimal colour. Very often, I just use white. With the blocks, this reduction relates to early Modernist architecture, children's play bricks as well as architectural models. You could say that there is a playful element to a lot of my work, which in this instance is particularly relevant. As part of my research for the project, I looked into the work of the German early education pioneer Friedrich Fröbel, who invented the whole concept of children's play bricks and whose theories famously influenced the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century architects and artists such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Mondrian.

BS: *When changing perspective, the work very much changes its look. On the one hand, all pieces look exactly the same, but then again one can really notice the unique features of each piece. The texture really comes through, maybe because of the use of white.*

CB: I have been using white for a number of years. In 2002 I curated *Colour White* for the De La Warr Pavilion which looked at artists and architects who have worked with white. I also made a series of white paintings. More recently of course I have been working with white marble for the Sappho pieces. I keep on coming back to white in my practice. For me, it relates to purity and a search for perfection but at the same time it is also related to imperfection, the temporary, and the fleeting. I think there is a continual balance between these two positions: the perfect or permanent and the imperfect or temporary throughout my work. Like the Sappho texts, it is something which connects to my understanding of the human condition, where we are constantly trying to create situations where we are comfortable and secure. We seek a perfection that is impossible to find. It is not made for us.

BS: *As children we are so much more fluent in building and destroying. With play bricks, for example, we create a form just to destroy it because we now want to create something else. By contrast, as adults we often want to build things that are immutable, perfect in a way. We choose things that fit a purpose, a perfect jacket, a perfectly curated bookshelf. We crave for constants, a balance. It feels even as a curator, and as artists, we are often searching to create perfect shows, perfect pieces. There is no room for mistake. Everything is a balanced and complete representation of who we are. When, maybe, children are not worried in the slightest about these resolved places.*

CB: A group of children visited the studio a while ago for a workshop, using thousands of pieces of wooden off-cuts that I had collected from a furniture factory in St. Leonards. The children jumped right into it and couldn't stop building all sorts of things. One boy – which illustrates how children's imagination works – built a lovely, complicated structure with strips of wood. After he had finished, he built a second structure to encompass the first one. It was a beautiful, astonishing construction. No other child did that, I would never have thought of doing that, and yet this little boy did it intuitively and thought nothing of it. As we get older we tend to lose that freedom of thought and playfulness, as we get worn down by everyday responsibilities. But artists tend to hold on to that, they are more likely to come up with unexpected solutions and to take risks. Taking risks is an important part of my practice. If I have an idea, I will play with it intuitively, then exhibit it even though I am never sure how people will respond. Which is why whenever I have a show, I won't ever include work that I am not absolutely sure about. The real risk takes place in the formulation and presentation of the idea. The audience's reaction is outside of my control. For example with the piece *Sit Down* (2018) I wasn't sure if it would work until it was completed. I commissioned a carpenter to make a life-size table and four chairs that don't stand up properly. The theme was dysfunctionality. It works as a sculpture, it has had a tremendous reception, but until it was made and taken out of the studio, I had no idea how people would respond.

BS: *Definitely, and things often do look different once the piece is realised. Can you tell me about the shelf with the coloured blocks?*

CB: It is called *Colour Theory* (2010). The small blocks came from the same furniture factory where I have collected all my wood and the colours are as I found them. They were collected over a period of time, assembled, cut to be the same width and placed on a shelf. The title is deliberately ironic. There is no colour theory. The colours are used by the manufacturers to identify the wood and preserve the engrain, so the piece is really about chance, intuition, and the narrative of how these particular pieces of wood came into my possession, were grouped together, refined and assembled into a work of art.

BS: *What about the wooden books of different sizes that have no case?*

CB: Unlike the books in the cases, these cedar books are replicas of a whole range of different ones from my collection. They are also more randomly placed on a single shelf, in much the same way we would place books on a shelf at home. The piece is called *Go, Littel bok* (2017) which is a reference to a line from Chaucer, who worked before the advent of printing, and who understood that once he had finished a book, it was down to chance as to how accurately it might be transcribed. In this instance, it refers to how a piece of art is inevitably open to misinterpretation.

BS: *In conclusion, books are in a way like building blocks for adults...*

CB: Yes, it is a good metaphor: how we build or develop our thinking and ideas through reading books. I collect books extensively, and I think people's bookshelves reflect who they are, or even who they think they are. Books represent more than just their content. They are sitting on the shelves as depositories of knowledge and information, but they are also a reminder of where we have been. As you grow older, your thinking develops or changes and this is reflected in the books you buy and collect. Whatever happens next in the digital economy, I don't think we will ever be without books, because we will always have this need to surround ourselves with objects.

BS: *This could also be a reflection on the post internet condition and a service economy where we possess less things...*

*As a curator, it is such a norm to allow space between works so they can 'breathe', but since your works look so different from each other, I want to put them in close dialogue, and see how the show comes together in the space. You did explain to me how the three dimensional work developed from your paintings. Do you intend to bring any paintings or wall works?*

CB: I think it might be useful to bring one of my grid paintings. My starting to work in three-dimensions all began with grids. I was painting around the edges of the canvas, so they became more like objects. From there I moved to painting on fragments of wood which were real objects, then I started collecting factory off-cuts and subsequently collecting all sorts of found objects. My collecting mania had begun!

BS: *And then there's that lovely grid drawing from when you were a child.*

CB: Yes, I shall definitely be including it in the show. I did it when I was seven years old and looking at it now, it seems the way I work and the things I am interested in haven't really changed in all these years. In fact, when I showed the piece *Grid Drawing* (1958) last year everyone assumed it was done in 2018.

BS: *I have recently been drawn back to painting and drawing as a curator because it serves so well to begin discussions related to art. In general, people feel more comfortable in discussing painting and I like to use it as an entrance point to other media.*

CB: Paintings are not usually that difficult to explain, they are retinal, as Duchamp remarked (disparagingly) as opposed to conceptual, so I can see what you mean. But painting was and still is important for me and I am currently working on two series of new paintings which will relate specifically to all the ideas we have been discussing in my three-dimensional work.

BS: *Personally, I feel that there is a clear connection with the other works and it is good to include one of these to allow others to see these relations. What about Child (2019), I think it is one of the most interesting pieces in the show.*

CB: *Child is a children's sized jumper made from very fine alpaca wool. In fact, it is a jumper that I used to wear until recently, when it was shrunk in the wash by mistake. So to me it has this strange duality: an adult jumper that now fits a child. And it will be hung at the same height on the wall as if a child was wearing it. The concept is in line with my thinking about the narrative trajectory of my practice and of course it is a companion piece to the childhood drawing.*

BS: *Finally, we have a window in the space. Are you planning to do something with it?*

CB: *Yes! I am planning to create a new Sappho text work for the window called *arms like roses* (2019) which, like all my text pieces, has an ambiguity and is open to interpretation. The individual words were not meant to be read together, but chance has put them in close proximity on the page and led to this lovely, poetic phrase.*

*Colin Booth* (born 1951 in Gateshead, UK, lives and works in St. Leonards on Sea, East Sussex) studied Fine Art at the University of Northumbria (1973-1976), at Edinburgh University (1977-1979), as well as at the University of Brighton (1999-2001). Solo exhibitions include The Museum of Contemporary Art, London, V&A Museum of Childhood, London, Curious Projects, Eastbourne, La Cambre Arts Visuels, Brussels, Trinity 7, Hastings, UpDown Gallery, Ramsgate, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1 Canada Square, London, and Tollergarden, Melbu, Norway. Group exhibitions include the Royal British Society of Sculptors, London, The Barbican, London, Sanyi Wood Sculpture Museum, Taiwan, Art Salon, Amsterdam, Whitstable Biennial, Helsinki Contemporary, Elbruton, Seville, Gozo Contemporary, Malta, as well as the Hastings Museum.

Besides his artistic practice, Colin has worked as a freelance art and film critic, journalist, and curator. 1980-82 he managed the Edinburgh International Film and Theatre Festival, and from 1993-1998 launched and directed the International Arts Festival for Young People (HYPFEST). Curated exhibitions include 'New Abstraction – A Survey of Scottish Abstract Painting and Sculpture', Scottish Arts Council (1980) and 'Colour White', De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill on Sea (2002).

<http://colinbooth.com/>  
@colin\_booth\_ (Instagram)

*Brunno Silva* (born 1986 in São Paulo, lives and works in Berlin) is a curator, writer, and art consultant. Originally from Brazil, he has a long interest in contemporary art with a passion for time-based works. He resided in London for the last two years where he studied Art History and Art Business at Sotheby's Institute of Art. During his studies he also further developed his knowledge of London's art scene, and most importantly its links and networks with the German capital. Brunno has curated exhibitions in Berlin, southern Italy and the UK.

<http://brunno.art/>

*in conversation with* is an exhibition format aiming at bringing people together through conversation and subsequent collaboration. Artists are invited to engage in dialogue with curators, authors, other artists, art historians, journalists or scientists and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are documented in writing, serving as text material accompanying the exhibition. They enable visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the artists' methods and of the artworks.

*in conversation with* is based on the premise that it is the artists themselves who can best provide information about their works, their methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask.

*in conversation with* was initiated in early 2018 by Katharina Wendler in Berlin and is guest of various (project) spaces.

## *Exhibition*

Colin Booth  
English Air  
March 9–22, 2019  
Opening: Friday, March 8, 6–9 pm

Prenzlauer Studios / Kunst-Kollektiv, Winsstrasse 42, 10405 Berlin