

## FrameWork 2/23:2

### David Court on Katie Bethune-Leamen

#### A whole that is also parts: Katie Bethune-Leamen in conversation with David Court

*David: The description of your exhibition notes that it brings references to historical domestic languages of geometric abstraction into the space of the gallery. It occurs to me that there are often allusions to the domestic in your exhibitions, but they do appear more overt, here, in the spritzdekor/red work stencil and plates? Were those elements the engine of the development of this body of work?*

Katie: The little engine that could was the grey tile work I think, and then simultaneously the red work quilt pattern and *spritzdekor*, though I have been thinking about *spritzdekor* for some time now—quilts much more recently. I'd love to hear about the other allusions to the domestic in my (previous) work you're thinking about.

*D: Well I guess I was thinking about Dr. Bronner's soap as a recurring reference, and porcelain as having so many domestic connotations, but also perhaps a more precise way to say what I was thinking would be something like a "domestic sensibility" in your exhibitions, thinking of the way that you've described the impulse to make your sublet in Victoria into more of a home.*

K: Yes, one of the many reasons I love working with porcelain is how ubiquitous it is, from e.g. our toilets to the Sèvres porcelain factory to its storied origins in Jingdezhen, China. And re. the sublet in Victoria, that was the turning point—when I realised it was going to be a little more long-term, and needing to make it into 'home' but not having any of the objects I usually enjoy living with. I think my work talks about being in the world, and part of the world is the spaces we live in, so in that way, it's there. But so are subways and lakes and shopping malls and forests, etc.

*D: I didn't know the term "red work." What does it encompass and how does the "domestic language of geometric abstraction" in red work relate to that of spritzdekor, which are bound together in the lengthy title of the stencil painting on the wall you face as you enter the exhibition space?*

K: "Red work" is a term that applies to quilt and embroidery work originally done with a colour of red fabric or thread that was coloured with (one of?) the first commercially available, affordable, colour fast dyes—in this case a red, which was also attributed as "Turkey red" which I mistakenly originally thought referred to the animal, but actually refers to the place. Red work became popular in the USA with the import of these bright red, affordable, colour fast cotton embroidery flosses and fabrics in the late 19th C and on.

I've always had a crazy soft spot for red and white textiles. I have no idea why. But I adore them. I think a lot about Northern European folk costumes, and they are very present there. I am currently spending a lot of my time on Vancouver Island. When I first went there—to help out my family—I thought it was to be very temporary. Realising I was going to be spending a lot of time there, I went into a funny, controlled paroxysm of thrift store shopping, in an attempt to feel happy/comfy in my sublet. In an attempt to create a sense of 'home.' Early in that process I bought a quilt from a thrift store. A weird, '90s quilt in teal and turquoise cottons, which is not my jimmy-jam. But it was hand-sewn, and winning in that way. I put it up on my living room wall, and was struck by, and pleased with how it owned so much space: created space. Soon thereafter I bought a really well-priced red work quilt at an antique mall. I had recently bought one on IG during the pandemic, for my apartment in Toronto, and I couldn't say no to this one. It went on the end of my bed. It gave me great joy. I thought a lot about these things—spurred by the quilt on the wall (which I liked to think of as looking as if Judy Chicago had designed the bed linens for a spacecraft). I was also thinking about my amusement (bemusement?) at noticing that my life-long impulse to gender as neutral unknown persons was likely unnecessary when thinking about the makers of these quilts. We can most likely assume a woman made them. And I was thinking about the hands of women making these quilts, and the hands of my women ancestors. Moving to new indigenous territories—Victoria is on the stolen land of the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples—I was thinking about being a 9th-generation settler in the country referred to as Canada, and what I owe to these lands, what it means to make things, and the legacies of making things in my own histories.

Simultaneously I was reading more about *spritzdekor*. I learned, from a catalogue of an exhibition of them, that it had been enormously popular. And this at a time when the same visual language was being engaged by avant-garde artists. This intrigued me. Also fascinating to me was that this first type of *spritzdekor*—with geometric abstract patterning—had been banned by Nazis as part of their “degenerate art” designation, forcing factories to turn to more pastoral and folk scenes. How incredible, this power.

I wanted to think about this power—to create space, to hold walls, to threaten power, to speak of aspirational moves, in the hybridised gesture of the two—*spritzdekor* airbrush with stencil, and quilt.

*D: This is all bound up, in turn, with a reference to interiors glimpsed in photojournalism from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I imagine a meaningful gap between an initial encounter with the work's formal immediacy—the intense red conjuring affective associations relating to bodies, erotics, violence and vulnerability—coming up the stairs into the exhibition and then encountering the work again, with reference to its weighty title, after locating the gallery worklist.*

*This gets me thinking about a conversation we had about the exhibition title, Pickle Fingers, which you were considering, and its potentially too-close relationship to the work Untitled (Molly left his claw marks in the tree). You were concerned that the phrase would interfere with or conflict with response to that work as referencing a paw with claws, not a hand with fingers. In the end, you took the risk. I have a better sense why that was a consideration, now, but our conversation nevertheless got at something that seems important in your work, which is the space between forms and words, to be simple about it. Often, as with that work and the adjacent one on the floor, the work seems oriented towards representation while at the same time pushing against it through formal ambiguity and/or associative excess. Does that ring true to you? If so, I'm curious how that has developed in your work, how you think about that.*

K: “Associative excess” is so apt. I think I need to quote that!

Yes, that rings true.

It was new to me to have work in the show that referenced experiences with other animals, or traces of other animals, or ideas of the violence done to non-human animals in their consumption.

And in trying to do so, in trying to put it into words—what those pieces were doing in the show—I realised (thought) that the common ground with the other work, or all of my other work, is the moment of encounter with information—whether visual and encountered in person, or encountered through image, or text—that is *bouleversant* (I don’t know why that French word is always the one that works for me). Something that is almost overwhelming. Maybe almost like how the sublime is described, but not at all that, as this applies to more ordinary moments, not the enormity of ‘nature.’ But something super intense. A beautiful candy wrapper on the street that stops you on your bike and which you have to backtrack to pick up. A murdered grizzly bear’s claw marks on a tree.

So those moments often start with the visual or information that conjures something visual, but is also about a feeeeeeling of intensity. So there’s a real effort to make objects that speak about this feeling. Speak about these thoughts and encounters. Not replicate them, but think about them and try to speak them. Have the sculptures speak them. And when I say try, like they are doing that for me, but they’re an invitation to that feeling. So that’s the push, I believe.

*D: I had wanted to address the indirect references to violence. There seems to me to be more of an undercurrent of antagonism in this show, an increased focus on the tension between pleasure—as playfulness, inventiveness, expressive intensity, excess—and violence, exactly in the way that you describe a beautiful candy wrapper on the street or a murdered grizzly bear’s claw marks on a tree as having something in common in their intensity, and perhaps the confusion that comes along with the pleasure of that intensity, before it can be sorted out, intellectually? This seems to me one of the primary preoccupations of your work.*

K: Oh, no pleasure in the intensity there! Just sadness, horror, and self-questioning impotence.

And I think in a way the word ‘consumption’ links the candy wrapper and the dead Grizzly, etc.

And what a crazy thing that that word could link those two things.

I’ll be honest: thinking about animals—specifically that at any given moment there was a tiger in a jungle, or a blue whale swimming in an ocean—used to be a way to get perspective if I was feeling sad or anxious. And I cannot think about animals anymore. Not really at all. Not even nice things about animals. I cannot believe that in my lifetime, considering the idea of going to see the polar bears in northern Manitoba has gone from being feasible to certainly unlikely and also not something that feels like a responsible action to take, just for the sake of personal interest.

I think the poles of intensity are perhaps most present for me in the work that is a reference to a 16th C Aztec hummingbird feather cape in the holdings of the Vatican. When I first read about that, I was so struck. I couldn’t believe. And the more I read, the more struck I was. When those items first began coming to Europe from the beginning of the Spanish colonising and killing the Aztecs, before their featherwork was turned to Catholic imagery, the initial appearance of such items understandably caused quite a stir—imagine seeing them in Europe for the first time! And generated a vogue for e.g. hummingbird feathers, and as a result there are logs recording vast quantities of them being sent by ship over to Europe to meet this desire. Imagine all those little dead bodies. It’s *bouleversant*. Trade routes, desire, consumption, colonialism are often quiet leitmotifs in the work because I’m often thinking about cross-cultural material desire—mother of pearl, meteorites, hummingbird feathers.

D: I recall Daniella Sanader's keen observation, in a review of your previous show at the gallery, *La douche écossaise*, that associative opposition is a throughline in your work, that there is a generative force of tension in your work—between attraction and repulsion, for instance. That seems heightened here. Are you working through these experiences? Working with them?

K: Hmm...I have to think about that. I am going to go back and reread Daniella's smarty writing again rn...

Ok, read it. Wow. How lucky to have people kindly take time to look at your work, and think about it, and write about it.

What that phrasing makes me think about is when I was working with mycorrhizal mushroom imagery around 2006–8ish. Like the *Mushroom Studio* which has a second life on IG, which I always find so perfect for it as that's what mushrooms do, keep fruiting and popping up unbidden here & there. And in thinking about mycorrhizal mushrooms at the time, often referencing the *Amanita pantherina* mushroom—the less-cute, brown-capped cousin of the *Amanita muscaria*—was the poles mushrooms inhabit from delicious, hideously expensive, gorgeous, to murderously deadly, and living off of decomposing matter. And what a glorious span! And our inability to figure out how to propagate so many of them. I love that. So yes, that push-pull.

And as an addendum—when I was making that show, *La douche écossaise*, I was doing a lot of research into, and thinking a lot about the historical Parisian Théâtre du Grand-Guignol (1897–1962), and for me the way that theatre operated, alternating light, comical, romantic fare, with its main attraction psychologically-fraught gore-fest pieces was an important reference for me.

D: I'm curious about scale in relation to all of this, somehow. Thinking about how some elements of the exhibition appear more 1:1, like *Gray loaf spanse II*, while these works we've been referencing, *Untitled (Molly...)* and *Untitled (humpback pectoral fin with tubercles)* have a much more reduced scale in relation to the things they reference.

K: Hmm...you mean 1:1 in *Loaf* because the tiles are 'loaf-sized'? Well, the title on that came after it was created. TBH I wanted larger tiles, but it was surprising how large they actually felt when they went from being measurements to being real objects in the world. I didn't expect them to feel that way. So there was no scale reference in their conception aside from being some version of 'tile-size' and bigger than previous ones. So the title definitely came after the fact.

And I hadn't considered ideas of scale in *Untitled (Molly...)* or *Untitled (humpback...)*. They are not sculptures of those animals/animal parts per se, so I don't think scale really comes into it in that way for me. Where scale does come into it is that I was really thinking about a strong feeling I had for this installation that I wanted to make sculptures that could be in people's lives. Like on a material level, I am tired of making large things that have a hard time living with people, and then I end up having to home them all. So that feeling was very present in making *humpback* and *Molly*.

Relatable human scale. Holdable even, in terms of scale, size. And in terms of material consumption.

D: Yes, human relatable scale is exactly what I was thinking about. Maybe with *Gray loaf spanse II* I'm not reading it well by way of the images, but I imagined that work as closer to the actual size of tiles you might be referencing, while *Untitled (Molly...)* and *Untitled (humpback...)* read more obviously as scaled down, which shifts them more to the register of imagination, calling to mind an image of things (animals, environments, experiences) much larger. There is something in the work that seems to also call attention to this desire or necessity of bringing things into a relatable scale.

K: Ohhh, I see what you meant re. scale & those tiles. I don't think of those tiles as having any specific reference. The initial impetus was certainly remembering that on Paris metro platforms, the area on the platforms where billboards are pasted up are framed by decorative porcelain tiles, but I guess, yeah—I think of that more as a departure point or impetus than reference. And these gray ones are way deeper and larger than I think of the Paris metro tiles being...

I'm going to have to keep thinking about the question of scale which you're framing or posing. I have noticed I tend to always have 'big' things and 'little' things in my installations. I've never directly thought about it, but my unaddressed feeling was that it was something about pleasure—the pleasure of making large things, and of having diminutive things, the range of scale in an installation, the different scales of being human. I dunno...

*D: How did the relationships between works form in the process of developing the exhibition—say between the Untitled... works we've been discussing and Grey loaf spanse II, which seem so far apart in so many ways?*

K: I don't see these works as having distance between them.

They come from a kernel feeling that is shared for me.

If I think about my installations, the works in them are the works I am making and thinking about at that time. So there's no thought process like "Oh, this will make sense with this." To me, they all make sense together, they are truly talking together about shared ideas, regardless of the perceived 'distance' between any potential originary points in their making.

*D: Is there an expectation or trust or inclination that the shared feeling that is the impetus for the individual work will make itself known in the exhibition of the work together? It does usually seem to me that your work is presented as a whole that is also parts—perhaps in line with your thoughts above—inviting a consideration of the whole, as relations between the parts, resonant and/or dissonant. Is that way off?*

K: No, I don't think I trust or expect that any feeling I've experienced as part of my initial interest in a reference etc. will be present for viewers. I think that is the hope though. I think I am hoping that there are many layers of resonances in the work—in terms of materials used, how they're used, and the forms and imagery engaged—that could vibrate for a viewer. I always engage the word "conversation." I imagine there's potential for people looking at the work, being in the work, to think back & forth with the work. That's an important hope for me.

And, yes, thanks so much: "a whole that is also parts"—yes! Thank you. Yes.

It's been fascinating to me that where this is complicated is in the space of commerce. That it's only in having to determine prices that the line between wholes and parts gets starkly drawn. Because otherwise, to me, a show as an installation is—as you said—a whole that is also parts.

*D: It's probably making too much of that observation to think that it is related to one of the primary problems of capitalism reflected in the space of commerce—the logic of separation and isolation that is commodity fetishism.*

K: I don't think that's making too big of a leap. I think that's germane. Resonates for me.

*D: Before we get too far from the Untitled works, I wanted to ask about the glass pickles.*

K: Right, so...I've had a glass pickle, in its little plastic packaging, for about 25 years or more. For most of that time, it's sat on top of the fridge in whatever home I lived in. For most of that time, the pickle was somewhat of a mystery—you could find awkwardly worded 'lore' about its uses/history, but it always sounded fantastical to me, and didn't seem to jibe with any personal accounts, histories, or sources I could find. But the pickle has had a real cultural renaissance in the past few years, including: the explosion of fermenting and pickling that exponentially increased at the beginning of the pandemic; the increasing popularity of 'pickle' flavour in potato chips, dips, and other snack items; the rise in popularity of pickleball; the popularity of the character 'Pickle Rick' from the animated series 'Rick and Morty,' etc.

So I'd been thinking about this glass pickle for a long time. And really thinking about it as some almost unclaimed, unknown, popular culture thing. As I started developing sculptures using reclaimed vintage ornamental marble fruits, I started thinking about using glass pickles similarly—embedded into bronzes. And searching for glass pickles on eBay—a frequent source for me not only of reclaimed materials, but also just a good index of what's out there in the material world—I came across glass weed pipe Pickle Rick which really transfixed me. I thought a lot about using a multiplicity of those in a sculpture, but that turned out not to interest me for a variety of reasons—the weed reference, their status as newly fabricated, etc.—and so I started to source reclaimed (used, vintage) glass pickle ornaments. As objects they remained quite unidentifiable to most people up until the 2022 holiday season, where their recognisability increased exponentially. I really enjoy agrarian and calendrical, historically-based holidays, but have no feelings for what has become 'Christmas' (I'm super into Winter Solstice, etc.), so TBH I was pretty chagrined to discern how 'readable' the glass pickle had become. But such is the life of information—when we lock it into a form (a tattoo, a t-shirt, a sculpture) it still has life and continues to evolve and accrue new or different meanings.

*D: That's all great. So, I don't suppose you want to say more about how these found their way into Untitled (Molly...)?*

K: Oh, I just wanted glass pickles for claws on this sculpture. I spent a lot of time over two months noticing the bear claw marks in a tree on the island I was volunteering on. And I finally asked someone about them, or someone just told me—I forget. And I just started thinking of this sculpture. A sort of disembodied paw. I've seen so many horrific photos of the disembodied paws and hands of murdered animals—bears and gorillas. I usually draw sculptures a lot before I make them. Very simple drawings. And in the drawings of this sculpture, there were always green claw-like forms in it. Glass pickles. I was probably thinking about glass pickles before this particular sculpture. And then when I started thinking about this sculpture, the glass pickles went into it. Often the sculptures are pretty much identical to the original drawings. This one had to change as it was my first time working with the industrial foundry that cast it for me, and they needed me to alter my form. The last foundry I worked with was more permissive with tricky forms and undercuts. So I had to reimagine the form quite a bit. So the pickles are set into the bronze differently than I originally thought they would be, but they were always going to be there.

*D: Can you also tell me more about the Stack sculptures? Do those larger forms refer to things beyond my intuitive associations with reddish lumps (organs-fruits)? They are exquisite, with such intricate and affecting relationships between their parts and between each other.*

K: So the *Stacks* are all made of both reclaimed marble, and bronze or silver elements I've had cast (and other bits), and then those handformed "sculptures of diner plates" I call them (which I think is very funny). But you didn't ask me where they come from, but what they refer to. I don't think of them as referring to anything, as much as being something? Thanks so much for liking them. That's nice of you to say. I hope people like the things I make! I hope people want to hang out with them.

*D: I don't want to lose track of that note about the 'bouleversant,' also. It makes sense to me to search for language aside from the sublime. What I get from your use of that term is a distinction between overwhelming, on the terms of the sublime, and overturning—does that sound right? It seems you're often talking about moments of being undone by an encounter, an openness that might be oppositional to the position staked out by the sublime.*

K: Oh, just to be clear 'sublime' has never had ANY resonance for me regarding my work. I spent a lot of time reading about the history of the term in philosophy in grad school, but it wasn't in relation to my work. It was in an effort to posit 'transcendence' as a ternary prong in the beauty/sublime binary.

I started working in spaces of abstraction as an extension of previous work thinking about shininess. Shine as shorthand for the presence and resonance of something. So with the formless object, or the less defined object, or the abstract object, I was first thinking of it as a place of meaning and potency. And one of the generators of such moments of encounters with potent undefined things is when one sees something that isn't immediately readable or understandable—which can be intense.

*D: Right, I would be surprised if you suggested otherwise (about the sublime). Although this interest in potent undefined things seems adjacent in the "not that at all" way that you've stated, so let's move on from that. What is the significance for you in what is more or less than immediately readable or understandable, as a place of meaning and potency?*

K: I think maybe you're asking about abstraction?

The monsters of HP Lovecraft (sorry to namecheck a person with racist views) and the monsters of Miyazaki are very potent bellwethers for me of this proposition—that much potency of presence can come from that which is undefined. Also the stop-motion work of Ray Harryhausen. These are forever references for me. Or a reference I've never considered but that is popping into my mind in a highly unsophisticated way could be the zen koan. But I'm really talking out of my ass with that last reference, so possibly I shouldn't make it at all.

*D: Well my question is rooted in my way of thinking about art, which is not to assume shared understanding about why someone would make and exhibit an artwork, so trying to get at what that is about for you, like why "the potency of presence" as something connected to "that which is undefined" is something you would respond to or cultivate in your work. I guess I'm always curious what can come out of asking about or talking about what might be taken for granted or beneath comment.*

K: All I can understand about making art is that—as I've long thought of it for myself—it's part of a 'conversation.' And that I'm trying to think about what it is to be alive, and to be alive with each other, here. That's not quite completing the thought... For 20-years now, I've been working over (slowly, incompletely) Emmanuel Levinas's thoughts on being as contained in his essays in the book *Alterity and Transcendence*. Those 20-years haven't given me anything like understanding.

I dunno if I'm straying from your enquiry here, but there was a point where I was really asking myself why I made art, and more specifically how I could justify that as an activity. And moooooore specifically how I could justify that as an activity if I spent so much time thinking about the well-being of other animals, and yet seemingly not doing much to contribute in that area. I don't want to describe the core of the answer I came to for myself—it makes me feel very vulnerable. But certainly the other part of the answer, which I guess comes to stuff I can share, is about conversation, is about trying to understand what it is to be alive, and communicate with other people about that question.

*D: I'm curious about how this relates to the tendency towards associative opposition, towards opening up or inviting the tension in finding something attractive and repulsive, for example.*

K: The intensity of certain experiences transcend a diurnal sense of being and somehow talk to me about existence. Existence outside of language. Being outside of the life cycle of the body. Sometimes these experiences are rooted in an encounter with a specific object or image(ry) and then I gather those and use those moments or references as bases for work that themselves speak the language of that moment...

I feel like the idea of “opposition” takes me to a place I inherently have no connection to: of binaries. I've always thought about the pushmi-pullyu creature from Dr. Doolittle (great, work by another racist author): they might have ends at opposition—binaries—but they are a whole, a third thing, a ternary structure, and I think a ternary structure collapses/expands into multiples/multiplicities, really. I think attractive vs. repulsive is an easy trick of language, and why I enjoy sculpture/installation—it operates in visual language, which I don't find as easily beset by binaries. Binaries are helpful towards understanding, but what if what I understand is collapse and openness in some way?

*D: The way you describe your opposition to opposition (as in binaries) is what I was curious to hear about. I don't know that attractive vs. repulsive is an easy trick of language. Maybe more like a desperate trick, or impulse, in the midst of the complexity of experience, where it can feel imperative to try to sort things out. I certainly feel drawn into this collapsing and opening through your work. I've been thinking about the fruit and veg pencil toppers—I get my signals crossed in reading them as empathetic re vegetal life or a skewered humanity as projected onto everything or/ and of course neither, but maybe a shadow of something like that cast on the wall upside down, facing up, seemingly caught.*

K: Oh the pencil toppers! Thanks for bringing them up! What I understand about them is that they're a lot about sculpture itself—thing on a thing. As in the old chestnut of sculpture/plinth, etc. And also about things in butts, which somehow seems to come up often in my work?! Why?! But also for several years now I've been thinking about what happens when you indicate the 'thingness' of something through a denotative gesture—a rope tied around something, or a bangle: what happens when you put a/make a bangle for a sculpture? These pencil topper pieces are in all these spaces.

*D: That's interesting, Katie. So you approach the ropes or bangles partly as ways to reinforce the 'thingness' of things. That brings Untitled (Molly...) into a different focus for me, thinking about the marble block, the rope, the red blob, the tension there.*



*I think I took up that idea of opposition from Daniella's review to float something about tension or conflict, which is not confined to the conceptual but can be something felt in the body, something material? Do you have any connection to that?*

K: Hmm...to tension or conflict felt in the body?

The first thing that pops into my mind is desire.

Desire is one of the strong roots in my work in terms of thinking about objects and relationships to them, or images, or others. Being desirous of an object, or being moved by another living thing. And when it comes to both those things—being desirous of an object, or moved by an encounter with another living thing—there is a conflict there. Desiring objects has its heaviness and weight in so many ways, and encountering other living things, when it's affecting, also too now always (it didn't used to be always for me) has the weight of their treatment by my species connected to it.

*D: That is something like how I would think about conflict or tension in your work. I heard someone say recently that desire is inherently optimistic. Your work always seems to prompt me to reckon with something like that—desire's optimism and its weight.*