

## Clay and Plaster Inscriptions of Justice, Freedom and Hope

Grant Gibson's podcast<sup>1</sup> on Staffordshire clay sculptor Phoebe Cummings and the Esse article about Longueuil plaster and clay sculptor Stanley Février<sup>2</sup> inspired me to think more deeply about and experiment with clay and plaster. Cummings' practice attuned me to the idea of ephemeral clay performance whereas Février's work highlighted material's expressive and political power. Added context and history to enrich this exploration of clay was found in Richard Sennett's discussion of technical developments and evolving practices in the making of clay pots and bricks over millennia<sup>3</sup> and Tim Ingold's discussion of the dialogic, multi-voiced, material practice of brickmaking.<sup>4</sup>

Working with clay is not my usual métier but provides an interesting perspective for considering issues of materiality, performance and law. I watched some Youtube videos to learn more about techniques for air dried clay modelling it, finding one with clear simple instructions for children, but which resulted in a grotesque mask mockery of an African male.<sup>5</sup> It struck me that this material can be shaped into anything by anybody, whatever their beliefs, motives and inspiration: hence garden gnomes, Madonna shrines, and lawn jockeys.<sup>6</sup> It is up to the maker to guide his or her own hand to inscribe meaning into the clay.

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<sup>1</sup> Grant Gibson and Phoebe Cummings, November 25, 2020, "Phoebe Cummings on Raw Clay," in *Material Matters with Grant Gibson*, podcast, MP3 audio, 37:57, <https://open.spotify.com/show/4HI3g1MKruYUDiPj7JxBgi>; see also Phoebe Cummings, accessed March 1, 2021, <http://www.phoebecummings.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> Didier Morelli, "Stanley Février," in *Esse, No. 101, New Materialisms* (2021) <https://esse.ca/en/new-materialisms>, 100-103; also see Stanley Février, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.fevrierstanley.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Sennett, Chapter 4. "Material Consciousness," in Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 119-146, regarding clay pots, 120-122 et seq., and bricks, 130-131 et seq.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Ingold, Chapter 2. "The Materials of Life," in *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 24-25, discussing and citing Gilbert Simondon, *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique; l'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1. éd. 1964), 41-42.

<sup>5</sup> Cindy Clarke and Jim Willett, "The Clay Teacher," September 16, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyHhHlnKQFw&ab\\_channel=TheClayTeacher](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyHhHlnKQFw&ab_channel=TheClayTeacher).

<sup>6</sup> Fredrick Kunkle, "In a Simple Lawn Ornament, Echoes of Slavery, Revolution," *The Washington Post* online, September 17, 2006, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2006/09/17/in-a-simple-lawn->

## Laws inscribed in clay

Clay's properties of fine malleability and quick drying made it an obvious substance for recording important information. Since 9000 BCE simple clay tablets were used to record agricultural data from market transactions and this usage evolved to more complex forms of written communication by 3000 BCE such that legal codes, astronomical events and epic stories were being written on clay tablets. Tablets were often unfired, meant to be wetted and the clay reused but some were accidentally fired when buildings burned. Fragments of the fragile unfired and more sturdy fired tablets exist today.<sup>7</sup>

Later laws were written on stone, for example, the Code of Hammurabi dated 1755–1750 BCE,<sup>8</sup> then on paper, giving laws a life that often extended beyond their social relevance or coherence. Today laws appear in digital form but the formalities of making law – who is empowered to propose law, to approve law and to enact it (bring it into force) – depend on foundational constitutional laws<sup>9</sup> which prevent an enthusiastic reformer from amending or repealing laws without complying with the required formalities of law making.

## Laws inscribing racial violence

Fundamental reform may even require amending the underlying constitutional laws,<sup>10</sup> which is made more difficult still because they are protected by onerous amendment rules such

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ornament-echoes-of-slavery-revolution/b8471bf9-704e-4fda-b3d2-37b8d6c4d8f3/. Pamela Sherrod, "The Secret Life of the Black Lawn Jockey," *Chicago Tribune* online, February 8, 1998,

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1998-02-08-9802080499-story,amp.html>.

Scruggs, C. "The Lawn Jockey and ``the Justice We Dream Of': History and Race in Raymond Chandler's the High Window." *Papers on Language and Literature* 48, no. 2 (2012): 115–36, discussing the use of the lawn jockey in literature.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson, Chapter 1. "Materiality and Literacies"; Robert K. Englund, Chapter 2. "Accounting in Proto-Cuneiform"; Steve Tinney, Chapter 27. "Tablets of Schools and Scholars: A Portrait of the Old Babylonian Corpus" in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> William Hardy McNeill and Jean W. Sedlar, *Readings in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), Part II. Law, 137-145, Slavery and Servitude, 164-167; Commerce and Debt, 191-194.

<sup>9</sup> In Canada, law-making powers and procedures are mainly governed by the *Constitution Act, 1867*.

<sup>10</sup> In Canada, the procedures for constitutional amendment are set out in Part V of the *Constitution Act, 1982*.

as requirements for a super majority or unanimity among lawmakers. Thus, although laws are only words expressing ideas, once inscribed as law and enacted, they become embodied in a population, with all actors taking on the roles dictated by the law. Even when bad, outdated laws are reformed, the residue of the previous discredited laws may remain, delaying or defeating effective change. Despite statutes,<sup>11</sup> constitutional amendments<sup>12</sup> and international conventions<sup>13</sup> we have yet to erase all vestiges of the once legally sanctioned attitudes of white European monarchs, settlers and slave owners toward Black North Americans and Indigenous peoples.<sup>14</sup> Laws may have been reformed but the human soul remains entrapped, traumatized, and diminished by the past and the laws which scaffolded it.

Février negates the promise of these legal reforms by capturing his own expressive gestures in white plaster, as if to show himself overwhelmed by white law.<sup>15</sup> With plaster and clay, he decries racial injustice, police violence against racialized communities and gun violence. The resulting sculptures are in direct conversation with laws that promise but do not deliver equality and nondiscrimination. Février's own dramatic gestures encased, solidified, and

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the *Canadian Bill of Rights* (1960, c. 44); *Canadian Human Rights Act* (R.S.C., 1985, c. H-6).

<sup>12</sup> For example, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Constitution Act, 1982*; U.S. Const. amend. XIV (passed by Congress June 13, 1866, ratified July 9, 1868).

<sup>13</sup> For example, the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (December 21, 1965); *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (December 16, 1966); *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (December 16, 1966); *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (December 10, 1984). For an extensive list of United Nations human rights instruments, accessed March 3, 2021: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CoreInstruments.aspx>.

<sup>14</sup> John Borrows, Chapter 1. "Canada's Colonial Constitution," in Michael Coyle and John Borrows (Eds.), *The Right Relationship: Reimagining the Implementation of Historical Treaties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 11.

imprisoned in plaster (kneeling,<sup>16</sup> lying, bound,<sup>17</sup> hooded, blinded<sup>18</sup>), perform the devastating moment when a person's humanity and legal protection are stripped away. What is lost – justice - is ephemeral, what remains is enduring bondage and suffering. Février's idea of embodied, dangerous art is reflected in a quote by Algerian journalist, poet, and fiction writer, Tahar Djaout, prominently placed on his website: "si tu te tais, tu meurs et si tu parles, tu meurs. Alors dis et meurs !" <sup>19</sup>

In *cette chair* (Fig.1) the artist is physical performer (actor or dancer) revealing his human vulnerability as he kneels in his underwear, arms raised as if under arrest, eyes cast down or closed as if humiliated or dreaming a nightmare. His body looks enslaved and subjugated glistening white and unmoving as though owned and objectified. Morelli describes this as "granting agency to his plaster, reproducing his likeness in sculpture and telegraphing himself into the room."<sup>20</sup> I wonder about the discomfort in making the casts – how he must have felt trapped and terrified in the plaster as it heated and hardened.

How to integrate the artist's own body as part of a work of art raises strange technical and aesthetic questions.<sup>21</sup> How did Février produce the work *cette chair*? From looking online for approaches to self-sculpture I am surmising he coated his skin and underwear with petroleum jelly and applied layers of wet plaster bandages smoothly to parts of his body, carefully ensuring

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<sup>16</sup> Fig.1, Stanley Février, *Cette chair* (2017-2019), accessed March 2, 2021, <https://collections.mnbaq.org/fr/oeuvre/600053988>.

<sup>17</sup> Fig.2, Stanley Février, *Yes we love you*, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://www.fevrierstanley.com/yes-we-love-you-2020>, from the performance *Le silence, c'est la mort, et toi, si tu te tais, tu meurs et si tu parles, tu meurs. Alors dis et meurs !*, June 2020 in Montréal North, a performance piece using this prone, bound plaster cast body in a funeral service and demonstration against policy brutality, recorded in photographs on his website.

<sup>18</sup> Fig.3, Stanley Février, *Sans titre*, (2019), from the series *Les grands espoirs*, (2019–2020), accessed March 2, 2021, <https://www.fevrierstanley.com/workinprogress-sculpture2020?lightbox=dataitem-k9hr55c62>.

<sup>19</sup> Février's website, Note 2. Djaout was assassinated by the Armed Islamic Group in 1993: James McDougall, *A History of Algeria*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 290.

<sup>20</sup> Morelli, Note 2, 100.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Belting, *Face and Mask: A Double History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 166-174, discussing the self-portraits of Jorge Molder.

a neat seam between front and back sections of each body part so that they could be removed and reassembled. Once the casting was done, Février presumably used the cast to make the plaster sculpture and finished that plaster sculpture. In the sculpture Février is kneeling expressively in one unified bodily gesture, making it almost impossible to imagine that he himself made the many sections of plaster casting that this sculpture would take. If he did this entirely unassisted it is a marvel of dexterity and adaptation, but I suspect he had to involve another person in making all or parts of the cast (e.g., the upheld arms?). Whoever assisted probably should get some acknowledgement for contributing to the technical excellence of the piece by helping make a more unified and accurate form. The short article does not discuss this but as a maker this technical and authorial issue intrigues me.

### **Legal debt relief and liberation**

After graduating from art school Cummings faced a dire legal predicament because she was unable to repay her student loans. Her solution was to seek judicial protection through a declaration of bankruptcy. While the interviewer Grant Gibson hints at the social humiliation of being discharged from one's debts as a bankrupt, Cumming counters that it was liberating because only by being so released from her legal obligations was she freed to pursue her art. Starting again from zero, the only way she could afford to make art was to live with her parents and take up short residencies working with clay. She turned her legal penury into an asset in her creative practice: by using unfired, unglazed local clay for her sculptures, and allowing them to decompose naturally,<sup>22</sup> assisting their demolition with dripping water<sup>23</sup> or actively destroying

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<sup>22</sup> Fig. 4, Phoebe Cummings, *Antediluvian Swag* (2016), accessed March 1, 2021, <http://www.phoebecummings.com/antediluvian-swag-new-art-centre>.

<sup>23</sup> Phoebe Cummings, *Triumph of the Immaterial* (2017), accessed March 1, 2021, <http://www.phoebecummings.com/films>.

them after completion,<sup>24</sup> she could recycle and reuse the clay. She preserves images of the works by photographing them and filming their construction and decay.

Cummings lives and works in Staffordshire, an area known for pottery since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and appreciates the quality and neutral colour of the local stoneware clay,<sup>25</sup> noting that when she travels to produce installations, she needs to adapt her practice to the local clays which all have different properties. She produces fantastical ephemeral environmental installations with wet clay, using humidity or dripping water to keep some of the clay wet or to allow it to erode and disintegrate. Her sculptures are science fiction-like, imaginary garlands or landscapes<sup>26</sup> constructed of tiny, detailed plant-like forms, supported on armatures of wire, wood, rope or string. Creating realistic or invented clay forms of leaves, petals and stalks, she makes small plaster moulds of them in order to reproduce them and arrange them in repetitive formations, building them into displays of imaginary vegetation. The building up of the intricate and delicate clay installation and its decay are all part of the slow performance of the works.

Cummings connects her clay work with writing by combining science fiction book displays with her exhibits, and asking gallery visitors to comment about her works in words and drawing. In the podcast she asserts that ceramics has completely informed how she thinks, and she considers her writing as part of her clay practice. As the podcast notes observe, “The writer, Imogen Greenhalgh, has described them rather lyrically as ‘holding bays for her thoughts and

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<sup>24</sup> Fig. 5, Phoebe Cummings, *Production Line* (2015), accessed March 1, 2021, <http://www.phobecummings.com/production-line-contemporary-art-society-2015>.

<sup>25</sup> This locational detail led me down memory lane: I was born in Wolverhampton, Staffordshire, and vividly remember as a little girl travelling by bus with mother to Walsall, a nearby market town, where she would bargain for good pieces of pottery ‘seconds’, the fancy bone china cups, saucers, plates and bowls that had slight flaws and therefore could not be sold as expensive sets in the high street shops. I also remember digging in our garden and finding a fragment of a reclining porcelain gentleman in 18<sup>th</sup> century white breeches.

<sup>26</sup> Fig. 6, Phoebe Cummings, *A Ripening Surveillance* (2018), accessed March 1, 2021, <http://www.phobecummings.com/a-ripening-surveillance/04t55f4iozqevttbgkg10uzs5az4i>.

ideas’.”<sup>27</sup> Cummings speaks of being inspired by the poems of Sappho, which are mostly fragments, disintegrated, and ravaged by time, suggesting her affinity for the once whole, clear and perfect, now fragmented or nearly lost voice of the artist. Cummings embraces the ephemeral, whether using the judicial system to let go of her early life of debt bondage and free herself to live as an artist, or meticulously constructing visions of alien worlds, demolishing them, and reusing the clay.

### **Artists inscribing new world orders in clay**

Words and law are important motivators for both Février and Cummings. They engage with law, performance, and materiality to inscribe clay and plaster with their ideas of justice, freedom, beauty, and hope. They record, elaborate, or augment their works using a variety of other media thereby allowing ephemeral works of performance to shape shift, endure or disappear.

Reflecting on how these two artists interrelate their materials and ideas helped me to see how, through artistic practice and performance and working with materials such as clay and plaster, it is possible to engage constructively and meaningfully with law. This is an elusive but crucial insight for me to develop in furtherance of my doctoral objective of innovating a new global Charter for our times through art and performance. As I work with forming and painting clay faces I think about how to inscribe my vision and meaning into this material.

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<sup>27</sup> Note 1, Gibson.

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Figure 3: *Sans titre*, 2019, from the series *Les grands espoirs*, 2019–2020.  
<https://www.fevrierstanley.com/workinprogress-sculpture2020?lightbox=dataItem-k9hr55c62>

Selected Artworks by Phoebe Cummings



Figure 4: *Antediluvian Swag* 2016 <http://www.phoebecummings.com/antediluvian-swag-new-art-centre/dadydoslyl8djamxcfi1ldlox2a70d>



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