

# KATIE CUDDON

## NIGHT PORTRAITS

space on the edges of other sculptures and supports, appearing as signals of danger from the outside world, external pressures intruding upon our interior spaces. The *Night Portraits* are embedded with the simmering disquiet of everyday life in recent years, with its unrelenting stream of bad news, impending chaos, and increasing division, all of which push against the protective shells of our minds and bodies – fragile vessels covering deep voids. The sense of domesticity in the exhibition is furthered by the presence of chairs and other items of furniture throughout the space. Differing in tone, design and quality, these objects serve as provisional supports for artworks and visitors alike within the space. Like the sculptures, our bodies are temporarily supported, and our perspectives are shifted as we move between seats amidst this family of objects. We become a body amongst other bodies within the space.

Between vessel and void, Cuddon's sculptures tell us what it might mean to express unsettled sensations through form. Simultaneously fragile and enduringly stoic, they communicate the essential qualities of their material as it is held, shaped, and manipulated through time. As the artist says of clay: it shrinks, transitions, acts neurotic, does not appreciate disturbances, but once fired, it sits hard and strong, withstanding both weight and weather. When we look at each work, its anthropomorphic quality confronts and discomforts us, questioning our own fragility, adaptability, hardness, and softness.

<sup>1</sup> Cuddon, *A Working Alphabet*, 2021

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cuddon, interview with MA students at The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2023

10 June - 3 September 2023

## Katie Cuddon: Night Portraits Joseph Constable

Katie Cuddon's sculptures exist between vessel and void. We look at them and imagine the energy that brought them into being. This is both the physical energy of the artist's hands that gave them form – pummelled, chewed, and bitten – but also the unspoken thoughts, murmurings and imaginings that were active in this process, their presence palpable through the internal and external pressures that accumulate on their clotted surfaces. This bidirectional pull is embodied by the artist within a paradox. In her own words:

The outer form is there to contain something, but it contains a void; the void seems to defy containment and yet there it is contained within the vessel. One illusion is broken, but another created. Clay can add voice to the paradox through its ability to be manipulated from outside in and inside out. Within my own sculptures, it's the coming together of these marks, the pushing out from within and the pushing in from the outside that energises this relationship between vessel and void.<sup>1</sup>

To look at Cuddon's surreal and anthropomorphic forms is to imagine what it feels like to be pushed and pulled, but also to be supported, held, and even cared for. Physical supports such as frames and pedestals of various construction guide these objects into our space. Their vulnerability and frequent (unpainted) nakedness elicits emotive responses to their inanimate yet charged presence: exposed and unsettled, yet powerfully visceral.

Cuddon makes works that exist in a state of inbetweenness: 'nearly this, but not...nearly that, but not quite either'.<sup>2</sup> The 'nearly, not' that cajoles and teases each elusive piece into reality speaks to the inadequacy of language to define what it is exactly we are looking at. Language becomes peripheral and tentative, performing an awkward dance of association in the face of the object's unmistakable being-ness. The works' titles play their part in this dance. Cuddon provokes rich interpretation, but with a constellation of associations that is ultimately unstable. Certain titles have emerged from trusting associations to a poem that a piece has prompted in her, associations that 'fold themselves into the work and add to the concertina of meaning'.<sup>3</sup> For example, in *The Wind's Hand* (2023), a sculpture that incorporates a small mirror into its form, Cuddon references Sylvia Plath's 'Morning Song' (1961), with its idea that motherhood carries both effacement of the self and creation of an (an)other. In *Desire's a desire* (2023) (inspired by Selima Hill), she teases us with an endless regression of possible meanings, as the repetition of the title appears to consume itself. Despite these specific references, the onus is ultimately on the viewer to realise and accept each sculpture's challenge to definitive representation through its precisely nuanced slipperiness, captured, paradoxically, in its materiality. This absence of specificity informs meaning just as the void informs the vessel. Each object's presence in a certain space and moment is mutable, but at the same time the relationships established between them unfold before the viewer and invite a multiplicity of interpretations.

Over the last three years, Cuddon has developed a new body of work that has emerged from being immersed in the domestic realities of motherhood and the pandemic, and comes together for the first time in her solo exhibition, *Night Portraits* at the De La Warr Pavilion. Its eponymous series of works comprises small, drooping forms exuding candle wax and inscribed with the artist's teeth. They perch precariously throughout the