



BUTLER GALLERY

finding  
the most  
forgiving  
element

**Helen  
Hughes**

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## **Knowledge of Reality**

A Critical Response to Helen Hughes'  
Exhibition *finding the most forgiving  
element*

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Some art work tempts the viewer to reach out and touch it, often materials we are unfamiliar with call out to us for further sensory input to back up our visual understanding. *finding the most forgiving element* goes a step further, the materials on display here jump out at us demanding to be experienced. We get familiar shapes in unfamiliar textures, grotesque forms that look like they could well be mouth-wateringly delicious if only one leaned in and had an illicit lick. Strange sculptures formed from even stranger mediums, familiar colours in unheard of places, shapes that are almost reminiscent of familiar items, but like a name on the tip of your tongue, the more you try to remember, the more elusive the references seem. The deeper you dig the less you find. Material vibrancy abounds and all sculptures on display are imbued with a buzzing sense of life. This can only be achieved through mastery of process and a deep understanding of the sculptural medium on the part of the artist.

Over the course of this essay we are going to systematically engage with Helen Hughes' exhibition *finding the most forgiving element*. By analysing the show and the work included in it (a combination of sculpture, print and video) we will establish themes that run through it and these themes will allow for a deeper understanding of why this exhibition is so compelling. We will trace a thread that begins with the foregrounding of surface qualities and the flattening of any narrative or descriptive content in the sculptures, take a quick detour through the strange philosophical land of object-oriented ontology and then use the framework we have established to critically appraise a selection of pieces from the exhibition itself.

## Surface

The first impression one gets when entering the large, brilliant-white gallery space is a profoundly colourful celebration of surface-level seduction. This is underlined by the fact that while almost all the pieces on show have three-dimensional volume (they are primarily sculptures after all) none have any real density. What we have instead is a visual language of surface treatments framed in various ways. Despite this seeming shallow celebration of skin-deep aesthetic in the work there is also its opposite, a celebration of a slow, painstaking and deliberate process of hands-on craft behind the surface. We have on the one hand, an aesthetic of superficiality while a process of deep material engagement and slow, personal, craft gestures in the opposite direction. Both are embodied here and yet both seem diametrically opposed.

A viewer won't be long in the gallery before they hear the distinctive tones of Tennessee Ford's voice lamenting his workload in the mines of Kentucky:

*You load sixteen tonnes, and what do you get?  
Another day older and a-deeper in debt...<sup>1</sup>*

The use of Tennessee Ernie Ford's version of 16 Tonnes - or rather, the use of a ten second clip from this song - underscores conceptually this context of 'surface' within the show as a whole. This is a song famous for its criticism of the debt bondage of the working classes (and of course its ingenious use of the clarinet) and whose definitive version was recorded in 1955 at a time of massive and sometimes violent tensions between labour and capital in America. Here we just get a snippet of the song on a loop, and without its wider context we get a thin criticism of capitalist exploitation and a specific focus on the act of working with one's hands. We try to look past the surface to reveal that there is nothing below it, no depth. Follow your ears and you will round a corner to find a wall-mounted screen showing a video that the audio loop is coming from. This lack of depth continues throughout the experience of this video work and far from being a criticism it is what creates its mesmeric effect.

The video on show is essentially similar to a rolling feed on any one of a number of social media phone apps. Violent clashes between anonymous groups, no-context clips taken from sci-fi movies, luxury products being advertised. All of these scenes, when shown without their original framing and without any contextual grounding, become *flattened*, each the equivalent of the other, and none with any interpretable relevance or meaning. In a further act of underlining, these scenes are green-screened onto the surface textures of resin dripped balloon shapes that are familiar from the exhibition. It is a literal 'flattening' or two-dimensionalisation of the decidedly voluminous works from the exhibition floor. So now we are considering three levels of context-collapse at play in this video. Firstly the soundtrack, which has been robbed of its political emphasis and simply describes a picture of hard manual labour; secondly, a collage of video content isolated from its original conditions of display and shown side-by-side, thereby thwarting any attempt at meaning making or narrative; and finally, a literal squashing of the three dimensional artwork found in the gallery upon which the video and audio are superimposed.

So, now that we have established that this video will thwart any attempt at narrative interpretation we have to take a broader look at its form. If it has no *depth* to explore let us instead take a helicopter view of its *shape* (if we can't go under it, we'll have to go over it as they say). The formal structure of this video points again and again to an equivalence, a flat ontology that's concerned only with the surface qualities of its subjects. I believe this offers a key to our understanding of the entire show. Surface qualities are all that exist here, they are all that is *available* to hand when engaging with this work.

Obviously, there are times when context can be important, this is so when one is trying to make a moral, narrative or epistemological point as is the case with so much contemporary art. But what if you are not *making a point* at all? What if instead you are simply exploring an ontological reality, or luxuriating in a material experience? Then context can get in the way, it can hinder the here and now with reference to the socially constructed. There is no room for anthropocentrism in this

show, human morality or politics is not what is being interrogated here, instead we have a show whose power lies in its unbiased exploration of material qualities in-and-of-themselves.

## OOO - One and Three Tables

If we are to engage with this work as a celebration of material reality it will be helpful to ground ourselves in the philosophical position that bolsters this interpretation. Object-oriented ontology (or OOO) is a relatively new philosophical school that is a subset of the popular tendency that is known as Speculative Realism. The principles of object-oriented ontology are summarised here by Graham Harman a founding member of the movement:

First, philosophy must deal with every type of object rather than reducing all objects to one privileged type: zebras, leprechauns, and armies are just as worthy of philosophical discussion as atoms and brains. Second, objects are deeper than their appearance to the human mind, but also deeper than their relations to each other, so that all contact between objects must be indirect or vicarious.<sup>2</sup>

What Harman is getting at here is that philosophy that starts and ends with the human mind and puts beings capable of conscious thought on some special ontological pedestal is a deeply flawed way to think about the world. We just have to look around us at the cause and effect of inorganic objects and systems bouncing off each other without any conscious human interference to understand that there is more to the world than that which is available to human interpretation or constructed through linguistics. To paraphrase another OO author, Timothy Morton; beneath the ceaseless arguments of philosophy, reality is churning.

To further this argument Harman points to British astrophysicist Arthur Stanley Eddington's description of himself sitting down to write at two tables simultaneously. One table is the one that can be described by the 'delicate test and remorseless logic' of modern physics, the table reduced down to a collection of atoms laid out in a specific pattern.

The second table is the table he knows and loves that he cannot mentally extricate from the memories, emotions and ideas he retains about this table, the one he *experiences*. Object-oriented ontologists would argue that there is a third table at play here (the only real table), here is Harman again:

Our third table *emerges* as something distinct from its own components, and also *withdraws* behind all its external effects. Our table is an intermediate being found neither in subatomic particles nor in human psychology, but in a permanent autonomous zone where objects are simply themselves.<sup>3</sup>

All this is to say that objects have their own reality and their own lives outside of our interpretation of them. We can never exhaust another object through description or study or analysis, there is always more to a thing, always some deeper stranger reality that forever eludes our understanding.

Think again about the works that confront the viewer in *finding the most forgiving element*, the foregrounding of materiality and the immediate lack of density. The sense one gets when looking at the objects in the show is of things living out their own internal narrative, one we can observe but not understand. There is a deep sense of play invoked by the visual references to pop culture and kitsch and the setting up of small closed-loop 'object situations' that we can feel and experience without having direct access to as participants.

Take what will most likely be the first piece one encounters upon entering the exhibition a *hierarchy of human beings*, in the context of an OOO reading of this exhibition. The title of this piece reads as comedy. The reference to *human beings* underlines the lack of people involved in this little drama that is perpetually on the verge of breaking out. For, what's the one thing we know about balloons? They have the potential to pop! Balloons as a device in visual culture can often lead to comic situations or trigger cartoonish anxiety, they exist as benign time-bombs with an uncertain countdown, the pop could come in the next few seconds or maybe never come at all. Take a closer look though and the

“balloons” are robbed of their initial dramatic potential and instead become something stranger. We look closely at a *hierarchy of human beings* and we see there is no knot tying off the end of the balloon. There is no separation between exterior and interior. No density, just surface, no body, just skin. No dramatic narrative, just the thing-in-itself. So, we must consider the material, texture and form if we cannot consider the narrative, these shapes exist outside of balloon-time, they are paused. They are engaged in strange relationships with one another squeezing and being squeezed, the Perspex frame is supporting them while being filled by them. These are objects relating to one another, engaging in an alien dialogue whose content we can never begin to grasp.

The material that these forms are made from is a hardened rubber. The frame containing them is a structure made from a formed piece of Perspex. However, on first glance both of these materials initially read to us as glass. This trick of materiality ends up serving as a device to pull the viewer into considering the process of creation behind the work. Most people are vaguely aware of the process of glass blowing as a way to give three-dimensional form to molten glass. But when confronted with a similar shape and a similar level of opacity and colour from a material such as rubber, as a viewer one must reframe one’s conception of the creation of the form. How does one get the rubber stiff enough to hold its form? How does one get the form to cohere in the first place? How is the colour applied and how does it still allow for a degree of transparency?

## Carpentry

Refreshingly these questions of how are answered directly through another video piece that accompanies the show. This video exists apart from the gallery space we find the exhibition in, an accompaniment-to as opposed to a part-of. The video is a simple one with a camera set up in a fixed position filming Helen Hughes herself as she first inflates a balloon (a real one this time) to comical proportions and then mixes a brilliant yellow quick-setting resin to pour over the top of the balloon. As the resin falls along the sides of the balloon it begins to give substance and opacity to its form in an incredibly visually satisfying way. All of this is accompanied by a voiceover explaining each step of the process, 'Helen inflates the balloon...' 'Helen then pours the mixture over the balloon...'. This cannot help but remind the viewer of any number of television cooking shows or YouTube *how-to*'s as the process here is presented as a simple step-by-step recipe. Finally, after the obligatory cut to the resin after it has been left to set (the 'here's one I made earlier' moment) Helen's next step is to pop the balloon. This is the key moment when we see how the inherent tensions in the material - the strips of resin wanting to come together like fingers on a grasping hand, the balloon surface trying to hold its integrity while being stretched past its limit by the trapped air that is trying to escape - all come crashing down when the pin disrupts the delicate balance of forces. We can see the resin strips start to twist and curl around on each other trapping the torn material of the balloon in their clutches as we get the 'pop' of the air escaping all at once. In place of the familiar balloon, we are now looking at a twisted form like the detritus of some high speed collision or the roots of some plant torn violently from the ground.

It is worth camping out on this process a little longer. Its inclusion alongside the exhibition itself and the clear no-nonsense delivery shows us that Hughes wants us to know or at least have an idea how these pieces were made. Knowledge of how the work was manufactured is important to the experience of the objects. Hughes works *with* materials, that is to say she *collaborates with* materials. The relationship between her and the constituent pieces of the would-be sculpture is not



autocratic. She does not simply tell the materials what to do and bend them to her will, instead she engages in a type of co-creation. There is no accurate way to predict the form of the finished piece or the behaviour of the resin, air and balloon combination as it reaches that form. Instead, there is an interplay of multiple different agencies at work in the forming of the sculpture, the artist's agency in handling and setting up the material tensions, but more interestingly there is also the agency of the materials in resolving the tensions between themselves and forming the finished piece. This brings us back to the idea of object-object relations and the decentering of human consciousness of object-oriented ontology. To borrow a term from Jane Bennett the materials themselves become *actants*. This term *actant* implies a non-human (even non-organic) entity that, while unthinking, still produces an effect on things it encounters and has, in that sense, an agency within its encounters with other objects in the world. Further when thinking about the assemblage of forces and intentions, agency and actants all rolled up in this seemingly simple video we are reminded of the following from Bennett:

I was struck by what Stephen Jay Gould called the 'excruciating complexity and intractability' of nonhuman bodies, but in being *struck*, I realised the capacity of these bodies was not restricted to a passive 'intractability' but also included in the ability to make things happen, to produce effects [...] An actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.<sup>4</sup>

In stripping these materials and forms of their cultural context it initially seems like we are being left short-changed, we are just looking at and considering surface effects. However, the video here becomes the key to unlocking the vibrant materialism of the show itself. We are not only considering the aesthetic effect of the artist's decisions but now we also have to consider that this show is the culmination of an intricate and infinitely complex interplay of artist and objects, thinking and things, actor and actants.

The video can be seen to act as a mission statement for the rest of the show. It gives insight into the process of ‘doing’ (on the part of the artist *and* the materials) that underlies each and every piece in the exhibition. The combination of video and show which could be read as a celebration of surface, of matter, of object-oriented thinking calls to mind philosopher Ian Bogost’s concept of ‘carpentry’.

For Bogost, a question arises when considering philosophy in general: Why is philosophy always mediated through the written word? Why is the act of *doing* philosophy the act of writing? He continues this line of thought as follows:

Sure, written matter is subject to the material constraints of the page, the printing press, the publishing company and related matters, but those factors exert minimal force on the *content* of a written philosophy. While a few exceptions exist [...] philosophical works generally do not perpetrate their philosophical positions through their form as books. The carpenter, by contrast, must contend with the material resistance of his or her chosen form, making the object itself become the philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

*finding the most forgiving element* is not billed as a philosophical treatise nor has any claim been made for it being such by the artist as far as I am aware. Despite this, it does end up *doing philosophy* in an incredibly direct and literal sense. Carpentry here has another important reference too, in Graham Harman’s notion of ‘the carpentry of things’ which refers to how things themselves form and shape one another and shape the reality around them with or without human intervention. If one was looking for an example of object-oriented ontology in action one could do a lot worse than spending some time with the work of Helen Hughes.

## Pieces

Now that we are armed with some philosophical tools and an interpretive framework for the show, we can zoom in on some of the specific works in question. The two wall mounted sculptures *language is not an adequate "mirror-tool"* and *a kind of ethical involvement 1* appear as a riotous double-act on the false wall that bisects the space. These two works are hidden from view on first entering the show and only reveal themselves after walking into the room and turning back towards the doorway. These brash pieces in any other show would be the loudest sculptures in the room but here - amongst the riot of colour and form on display - they end up offering a calmer moment of reflection sitting as they do against a blank white wall with no clear view of other work in the background when viewed straight-on.

Looking at these pieces side by side we are reminded of the slick sensuality of product photography or the impossible perfection of cartoons. *a kind of ethical involvement 1* calls to mind Homer Simpson's perfect doughnuts, a food so delicious and one with which Homer is so obsessed that in one episode he happily sells his soul for a bite. Homer's doughnuts have a lot in common with the food-images we see in advertising for fast food chains. Food objects that are flattened and airbrushed into the platonic ideal of a product in which real doughnuts participate but none actually inhabit. Thinking about this cartoon-perfection in the context of the show, we understand that the surface appeal seems to borrow from the techniques and visual language of consumer product advertising but instead of making a case for the purchasing of some life-changing experience or object, it instead makes a case for the seduction-in-itself. These slick forms are selling nothing but themselves. We get to luxuriate in the glistening finishes and sugar highs, the light-play and the mouth-watering primary colours. For these sculptures are reminiscent of much but representative of nothing, there is no subject here outside the sculpture itself. They are evocative while being entirely non-representational.

*language is not an adequate "mirror-tool"* is the second part of this duet and it is as sensual as they come. A membrane made from what could be soft sweet sugary Moam or some other treat that causes the mouth to water when you peel back the waxed paper packaging, and the smell of the glucose hits your nose. Like any number of soft sugary chewing sweets, it is visually delicious and yet physically ambiguous, what is it made from? What is this material called? For that matter, is there even a name for these chewy glucose sweets? What *is* a Moam? The ambiguity of material coexists with an ambiguity of form. Is this piece reminiscent of a sucky sweet or a cow's udders? Much like the synthetic treats or Homer's doughnuts the pieces themselves are seductive and effecting, their surface is calling out to us on a visceral level, one must stop oneself from getting too close for fear of inadvertently reaching out to touch the work. The material reality is more than enough to bask in and experience. They are a celebration of strange materialism in and of itself, made from matter mostly found on building sites and in the arcane worlds of product manufacturing and prop making, now divorced from their intended practical use, and instead we are invited to meet the materials on their own (strange and enticing) terms.

Further traversal of the space reveals a scenario that takes place between the sculptures *the wonder that a thing exists* and *we are now absorbed in something*; these two works are drawn together as they both sit in relation to a three-edged frame leaning against the gallery wall. *the wonder that a thing exists* takes the form of an amorphous slab of poured foam that is left to hang over the top of a Perspex pillar. In this form (and others like it in the exhibition) we can see where the different layers of poured material coalesced and how they built up over time to create the work. This again gives an almost organic vibrancy to the piece, we can see how it developed over time just like watching the rings on a tree, we can see how the artist used her agency and power to mix and pour the coloured medium but also how the quirks and tolerances of the material itself defined how it solidified and the final shape it took. The work exerts an almost alien presence. *the wonder that a thing exists* is almost a lot of things; almost alien, almost organic, almost has agency, almost seductive. . It is this strange nearness to something we can't put

our fingers on that imbibes this and other work in the show with its power. The closer we get the more we explore, the odder and more aloof these objects appear.

*we are now absorbed* in something is yet another balloon-shape, this time sitting on the ground. Behind it, an open-ended frame leans against the wall of the gallery and serves as a notional container for the object and its interplay of material layers. This sculpture is very reminiscent of a glass sphere, half coated in a pink glaze and hiding within it a smaller irregular deflated shape. Like the other objects on display, closer inspection reveals that this is not in fact made from glass but a combination of rubber/resin-based quick setting pours. The pink glaze and the glassy sphere it's spread over are at odds. The pink looks like one could put one's finger in it and pull it away with a globule of delicious icing covering your fingertip, the sphere like a rough-cast thick glass find from an archaeological dig. There are immediately compelling aesthetic tensions in this work and this only gets more apparent when we see the third layer hidden inside the first two. It could be an inner wall of skin deflating. Or is it some new type of organ growing inside an incubator? As engaging as the work is, the materials only *withdraw* more and more as we consider them. They get more and more curious until they take on a life of their own and that is how this show opens us up to the deeper unimaginable life of the non-organic. All these elements will be locked in these strange relations with each other with or without the viewer to see them. The more the work ignores us the more intrigued we become.

## Conclusion - *finding the most forgiving element*

*finding the most forgiving element* is a celebration of material. The title itself is a nod to the push and pull of collaboration that exists here between artist and object. The process is foregrounded through the use of a *how-to* video and the flatness (both physically and ontologically) of the surface qualities of these sculptures is demonstrated by the accompanying video pieces within the exhibition. There is a confidence in the work, its riotous use of colour, the fact that the artist does not have full control over the final forms, even the potential for cartoonish comedic value - it's hard to view this work without a smile on one's face and it's hard not to feel like this exhibition is a breath of fresh air.

There is no grander narrative here, no underlying *message*. Instead, what we get is a sensory experience and a number of strange encounters. We see balloons that turn to glass on further inspection and turn into something stranger still when the process of their creation is revealed. We see mouth-wateringly sweet chewy objects that are begging to be touched or even tasted, reaching out to us almost of their own accord. At this point we go beyond 'seeing' entirely, we are now in the realm of coexisting and forming relationships with these sculptures, relationships that we are not the masters of, merely participants in. We foreground our own centrality, and we are exposed to the underlying essence, the vibrancy of these inorganic forms. The surface existence of the material - its muteness, its being-of-itself, its self-consistency and its self-assertiveness - recalls a quote from Iris Murdoch about the feelings engendered by grappling with the task of learning a new language::

I am confronted with an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something that exists independent of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love [of learning] leads me away from myself and towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal.<sup>6</sup>

In much the same way *finding the most forgiving element* leads us away from ourselves and towards something we cannot swallow whole. Hughes shows us that there is something more out there, even in the lowliest construction materials, the humblest cable-ties, the substance hidden inside props or the most fragile balloons, and what better reward can there be from engaging with sculptures than encountering a whole new ‘knowledge of reality’?

**Daire O’Shea**

## Notes

1. “Sixteen Tonnes”, Tennessee Ernie Ford, *Ford Favourites*, Capitol, 1955
2. Graham Harman, “The Third Table” in *The Graham Harman Reader*, ed. Jon Cogburn & Niki Young (Alresford: Zero Books, 2023), 3.
3. *Ibid*, 7.
4. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4-5.
5. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology or What it’s Like to be a Thing*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 93.
6. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, (Abingdon, Routledge, 1970), 87.



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