



# J.J. McCracken

## Living Sculpture

Article by R. Stevie Jones

THE ANONYMOUS MODELS IN J.J. MCCRACKEN'S PERFORMANCES move with definitive precision; an eerie tension fills the hosting gallery and viewers are immersed in a meditative and viscerally poignant environment. The performers' hands move nimbly as they completely surrender to their tasks. Clay freely drips, dries, takes shape and dissolves in sharp contrast to the performers' actions which are at times rigid and coldly scientific.

In *STASIS* and *Dissolve*, McCracken ironically comments on mass-production and materialism by using unfired clay as her subject. In both performances uniform vessels are made by an assembly line of anonymous paid workers clothed in identical white jumpers. In *STASIS* there are three workstations. At the first station, vessels are meticulously thrown at the potter's

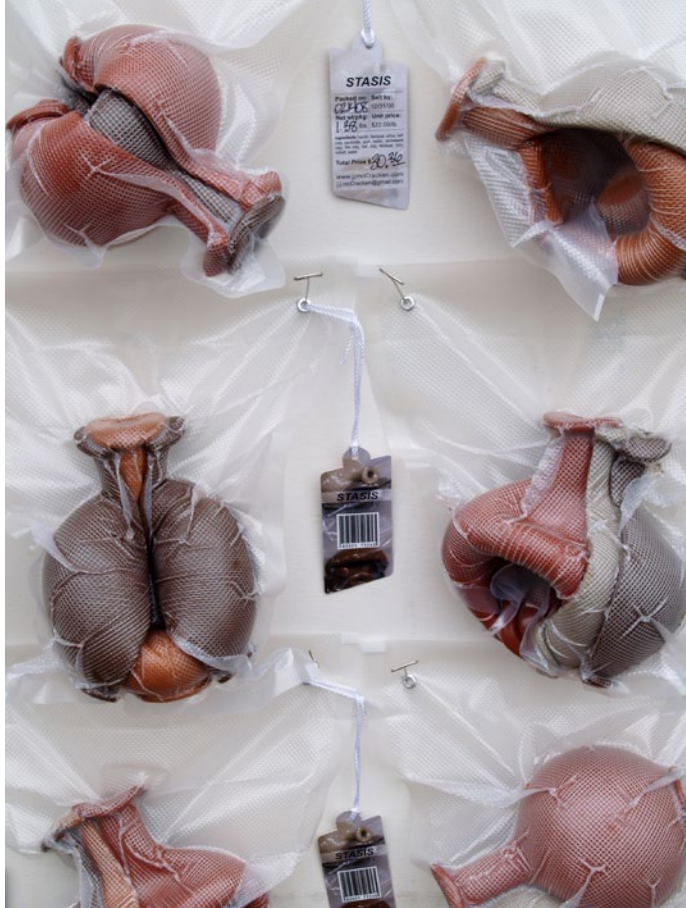
wheel and neatly placed on a shelf to the worker's side. At the second station, the worker gathers the vessels and vacuum-seals them in plastic packaging. As the third station receives the sealed packages, a worker weighs, prices and tags each one before systematically pinning them to the wall in rows.

The resulting objects on the wall shift in resemblance from food products to stored organs to anthropological specimens. Seen abstractly as all of these or any, the clay vessels transcend their precious, decorative and functional associations, bringing them away from the craft world where they usually exist within and into the realm of contemporary conceptual pieces of art. The discourse of craft is complicated by the act of weighing and pricing the vacuum-sealed vessels, which has the objects valued as remnants of an event of

*Left: View Through Freezer Door: Workers on STASIS Production Line. Photo by Mary Coble.*

*Below: STASIS: Workers on the Line. Workstations #1, #2 and #3; Generation (foreground), Preservation – vacuum sealing (centre) and Presentation – weighing, pricing tagging, display (far). Photo by Mary Coble.*





*Top left: STASIS: Workers. Workstations #2 and #3. Photo by Mary Coble.*

*Bottom left: STASIS: Worker. Workstation #3. Photo by Mary Coble.*

*Top right: STASIS: Grid (detail). Photo by J.J. McCracken.*

*Below: STASIS: Installation View Between Performances. Photo by J.J. McCracken.*



homogeneous mass-produced products but not readily as individual works of art.

McCracken was prompted to add this element of weighing and pricing the objects by an overheard conversation between orderlies and nurses discussing the cost of keeping a loved one alive in hospice at the end of life. Many elements of McCracken's performances are directly related to the experience of watching a body slowly perish – from the sterile environments she creates to the corporeal references that exist in her clay objects and her manifestations of staving off decay. Death, loss and a seemingly endless wait are important phenomena in her work, coming from this very personal experience. The acts that McCracken choreographs, involving the preserving of pottery through sealing techniques, examine the exertion that humanity applies towards an ideal, which within this particular dialogue of her work, is paradoxically defined by the wholeness and ripeness of life. McCracken chooses not to fire the clay vessels so that the forms are kept in a state of transformation and activity and so, metaphorically, of living.

Other personal experiences inform McCracken's work as well. In *Dissolve* (performed in Washington, D.C., 2004-2007), small vases are produced on an assembly line and then packed in Mason jars filled with corn syrup. The jars are then sealed, dated and

displayed on shelving. Inside of each jar, carefully fabricated leather-hard vessels slowly disintegrate in the water-soluble syrup. The impetus to abandon firing clay was seeded while McCracken was experimenting with glaze materials in a high-temperature gas kiln. She amassed a huge collection of ceramic sculpture that was ultimately unsatisfying and found herself stockpiling boxes of works that she had deemed 'dead' (and bringing them along with her for every studio and home relocation). She began to understand that her conversation with this versatile responsive material was over once it was fired. Moreover, she was questioning why she subjected herself to this compulsive producing and amassing in a world overflowing with product. McCracken's work began to shift and paths paved by influential artists Robert Morris and Carolee Schneemann enticed her to create work that engaged her viewers by showcasing the art-making process itself instead of the end product.

With a background in anthropology, McCracken composes her performances and amasses her objects to discuss not only current social behaviours, but also human history and development. Within this discourse, McCracken's exploration of preservation and references to scientific or anthropological specimens, speaks to what our history has forgotten and changed. In *Dissolve*, her shelves of vessels read as relics of a nondescript

***Dissolve: Worker.*** Workstation #2: Refining. A foot ring is trimmed into the bottom of the meticulously formed vase, an object that will inevitably disintegrate. Photo by Mary Coble.



***Dissolve: Worker.*** Workstation #3. Preservation – packing jars (pouring syrup). Photo by Mary Coble.



time and place. And just as anthropological research seems to exist in an objective state – plucked from the past and not brought fully to the present, so too does McCracken’s mysterious accumulation of rows upon rows of jars.

As a study of the culture in which these works were produced, the use of corn syrup is significant. McCracken elaborates on her choice of this material: “There are interesting parallels with the use of corn syrup as a cheap filler used in an enormous percentage of the commercially packaged foods currently on the market for our consumption – parallels that I am picking apart in my current sculptural work.”

In McCracken’s work, corn syrup represents our culture’s fixation with efficiency, perfection and gratification. As a preservative it staves off natural cycles and just as preservation is a major effort within a capitalist society, so too are our efforts to fill in and retain humanity’s history. In both cases, loss is inevitable. As the materials of our present culture are constantly being created, deemed obsolete and disposed of, details of our existence are discarded and forgotten over long periods of time.

Depending on how far one chooses to look, many levels of struggle and demonstrations of loss can be

found in McCracken’s performances. She is interested in making work that can engage a viewer on the most surface level, appreciating just the beauty of the poetic acts she composes, down to all possibilities of interpretation existing in every movement and material choice. For example, once we look beyond the shifts in resemblances that occur in the curious objects produced in *STASIS*, we can see further to fascinating contradictions and conflicts that are present. Besides the aforementioned oscillation between craft and fine art that is visible in the objects, there is also one between protection and vulnerability. While the vacuum-sealing signifies shielding and constriction, the unfired vessels within are still completely vulnerable to alterations caused by only the slightest pressure of a finger tip. The objects are simultaneously impenetrable and unprotected; restrained and unrestrained. In addition, the profound influence that Schneeman has had on McCracken’s work is seen here in certain corporeal qualities of the work. The androgenic appearance of the performers in *Stasis* combined with the resemblance between her created objects and severed genitals, bring forth implications of nonspecific gender-based conflict. All

**Dissolve: Worker.** Workstation #3: Preservation – releasing air/adjusting jar headspace. Photo by Mary Coble.



**Dissolve: Worker.** Stocking Display (off Workstation #5 where jars are labelled with date). Photo by Mary Coble.



of these references and visible struggles add intricacy and pensiveness to the performance.

In McCracken's most recent work, *Living Sculpture*, the vessel and assembly-line are abandoned. In fact, many of the elements implying rigidity and structure are abandoned here. In *Living Sculpture*, McCracken chooses to express activity that is cathartic. Here she chooses to allow life to thrive rather than to encapsulate symbols of life in demonstration of staving off death. Vignettes are arranged throughout a space and each incorporates performers carrying out specific acts while their bodies and all surrounding objects are coated entirely in a rich, soft, tan or ochre (depending on the location of the performance) clay – including the walls, floor and the three-foot-tall spheres on top of which performers stand. We can see Schneeman's influence here again, this time in the use of the female body as material in the work. The acts being carried out by these women include counting viewers as they enter and exit the space using an abacus placed at the gallery entrance, knitting and unknitting a garment, rolling perfect balls of clay that are then dropped into a puddle of water to dissolve and finally a cello player who plays a twelve-bar musical composition and then, after a pause, plays the same music, which has been recorded live, backwards.

Repetition is obviously employed here but because each of these actions occurs simultaneously and because the clay that coats the space is now completely unrestrained, the futility expressed in *Living Sculpture* reads almost as celebratory rather than confined. Beauty is much more manifest in this new performance, which helps promote this joyous evocation.

The application of simultaneity makes the work feel as if the contained world that McCracken creates in this performance is explicitly of the present moment, as opposed to being in the sort of objective, disconnected realm that *STASIS* and *Dissolve* exist within. Timing within the realms that she creates is of the utmost importance to McCracken, who sees her work as poetry. Like the artist Ann Hamilton, McCracken feels limited by verbal language and finds visceral experience to be the only way to communicate certain thoughts and feelings. The sphere in *Living Sculpture* functions as a 'pregnant pause', as she describes it, providing a comma or a caesura within the piece. By having a range of activities and clay transforming during this pause, McCracken wants to express time as progressing at different speeds, inverting and being suspended all at once. In this performance, time actually seems to act irrationally and emotionally.

The supple, tiny hand-rolled balls and the beautiful knitted garment are analogous to the precious vessels spun in the earlier performances and deal with the same issues of production and futility. But by abandoning the assembly-line, introducing colour and having the statuesque models immersed

completely in the clay themselves, the sterility has been relinquished. The controlled acts in *Living Sculpture* do not lead to tight, scientific studies of seized objects, but rather to capriciousness. The precisely-rolled balls fall apart, the tightly knitted garment becomes a totally unstructured pile of yarn and the abacus' beads are moved at the whim of the unpredictable comings and goings of gallery visitors. The very active and organic quality of *Living Sculpture* makes the performance expansive, swollen with life.

And still, as much as this performance is brimming with possibility, it is also filled with futility and loss. For every step taken forward, one is taken back. The rolling of the balls of clay echo the assembly-line production of the vessels: Each demonstrates the same struggle for perfection and the same subsequent act of apathy towards this struggle as the forms are cast off. Upon completion, the balls are simply dropped to dissolve in a puddle below just as the vessels are suffocated and left behind in anonymous row upon row.

Evocative metaphors reveal themselves when McCracken's stage presents to us the unbound, organic behaviour of raw earth transforming in the hands of these impersonal beings executing idle,

***Dissolve: Collections Management.*** The Myth of Sisyphus soundtrack designed and produced in collaboration with Marc Blackwood. Photo by Mary Coble.



mechanical acts. These idle acts – such as repeatedly canning and vacuum-sealing pottery or knitting and unknitting seemingly endless lengths of yarn – reveal McCracken’s contemplative musings on futility. Just as Sisyphus embraces the eternal task of pushing his rock up a hill only to watch it fall back to the ground, McCracken sentences her performers to tasks cyclical, ostensibly infinite and just as futile. Her performances present no beginning or end, only repetitive actions that have viewers questioning what these beings are searching for or trying to attain. The acts often interpret common human behaviours analogous to social obsessions such as cataloguing, producing and hoarding. Relating these staged acts to their own daily tasks, viewers are probed to go further into the performance and ask themselves what humanity at large is striving for through these endless efforts and if our path is of a linear and progressive trajectory or circular. There is a

search for an ideal and a feeling of loss at the realization of its unattainability present in all of McCracken’s work.

On the subject of whether McCracken sees Sisyphus as joyful or sorrowful about his eternal sentence, McCracken says that “there can be sorrow, but there is nothing negative in that sorrow. It just is.” McCracken seeks not to elicit commiseration in her work. She works solely to express her visual poetry in a manner beautiful enough to articulate the abiding love she has for clay. The pensiveness of her performances, the drama and the metaphors are all resulting tones born from the strict adherence J.J. McCracken applies to her impassioned vision.

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A podcast of J.J. McCracken’s performance, *Living Sculpture*, will be available soon on our website at [www.ceramicart.com.au](http://www.ceramicart.com.au).

**Jars from the Dissolve Project.** Local clays formed into bud vases, corn syrup, mason jars, date labels. Dimensions varied.



**The Inevitable Dissolve.**

