

Frances Priest: *Unfixing*

*Things taken together are whole and not whole, something which is being brought together and brought apart, which is in tune and out of tune: out of all things can be made a unity, and out of a unity, all things.*¹

(Heraclitus, lived c.500BC)

The influential ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote only one manuscript, which is now lost. The only extant writing is to be found in *The Cosmic Fragments*, a modern compendium of quotations ascribed to him in other ancient Greek philosophical texts. Curiously, this fashioning of literary splinters into a volume parallels the politics of Heraclitus' own philosophy. As observed in the opening quotation, Heraclitus considered that anything complete was, out of necessity, constituted by the incomplete. Furthermore, the incomplete could only be transformed into the complete with a force of change. Because of this, Heraclitus considered change to be fundamental to cosmology. His most quoted passage – "it is impossible to step twice into the same river"² – has become emblematic of the conviction that all things – life included – exist only through change. We may swim in the same river every day, but we will touch a singular molecule of water just once. To be unfixing is thus to recognise the true nature of things. Change is the only constant.

If change is the only constant, Frances Priest is a remarkably consistent artist. In accordance with Heraclitus, Priest uses the verb 'unfixing' to describe how unity is comprised of the incomplete and change is a force of constancy. In *Unfixing*, pattern is pushed to its breaking point across a new vocabulary of striking forms. Yet, with the usual masterful control, Priest curtails its collapse. Her work teeters on the edge of systematisation and spontaneity, producing a visual complexity that surprises as much as it delights. An intuitive use of colour across diptychs and triptychs – forms more associated with painting than ceramics – capture the movement of pattern from its conception, via dissolution, to reassembly.

For Priest, 'unity out of incompleteness' is in one sense temporal. Historical frames of reference – the ornamental details collected by Owen Jones in his 1856 publication *The Grammar of Ornament*, the wallpaper and textile design drawings of William Morris, and the pattern books found in the tile and linoleum factories of Craven Dunnill in Ironbridge and Barry's of Kirkcaldy – are unfixing from the past and deployed in the contemporary to remind us of the transitory nature of the moment; that we are formed by the past but are not bound by it. Indeed, the rectangular ceramic wall panels evince a strong sense of agency in the here and now, as if seeds are scattering in the wind, birds are flocking across the sky, insects have fleetingly gathered, or an ice shelf is slowly melting. These works ask us to critically recognise the inconsistencies of the world around us; for the sensations of a fleeting moment are here produced through a comparatively long production process, only to be suspended in fired clay, a material as fragile as it is durable.

Change becomes constancy in the material shifts between two- and three-dimensions, where Priest explores how different media can manifest similar but different compositional relationships. For instance, the space around each individual motif is highlighted as significant, but in discrete ways. As smooth as the vitreous slip of Priest's ceramics, the gouache paintings activate the brightly coloured Murano paper as an essential part of the overall composition. By consciously maintaining them in outline, each shape is individually marked out from the others and from the background. This makes

¹ Kirk, Geoffrey Stephen. *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 168.

² *Ibid*, 381.

the space between as expressive as the motifs themselves. The same is true of the free-standing pieces, where the gaps between objects is equally charged. However, the background is no longer Murano paper but a room, a much more dynamic, three-dimensional, context of display.

Interestingly, the wall reliefs sit in-between these two and three dimensions, utilising elements of the free-standing objects against a flat wall reminiscent of the Murano paper. In her movements across media, Priest demonstrates that a linear outline in painting can become a shadow in a relief, and even a three-dimensional shifting space. In all cases, Priest manipulates how we make sense of pattern to show that objects have resonance and expression precisely because they are spatial objects. Our changing views of these works remind us that whilst perception might seem a static activity – that there is only one way of seeing an object in the world – it is in fact changeable and varied; it is unfixed.

The reliefs are the most radical formal departure for Priest. Neither paintings, nor tiles, nor mosaics, nor sculptures, they are all four combined into one. They speak as much to the relief paintings of Constructivism as they do to the history of ceramics. Thus, the aesthetic politics underpinning *Unfixing* is to disregard what seems to be an increasingly redundant distinction between fine art and craft. Eschewing simple categorisation, Priest instead asserts the interdisciplinary vitality and power of ceramics as a material rather than an ideology, and its ability to respond to both painterly and sculptural approaches.

Might the literal and metaphorical dissolution of pattern in *Unfixing* allude to broader changes; socially, politically, culturally, environmentally? For the better? For the worse? Each must decide for themselves; this is not polemical art. For me, Priest's work is a call to unfix how we classify artistic practice, and to recognise the mutability of what objects have meant in the past, what they mean in the present, and what they might mean in the future. In this regard, *Unfixing* stands as a stark reminder that change is the only constant.

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