

What's with all these big spoons?

Chris Bird-Jones' work holds things, in buckets, in bowls, in spoons. Working primarily with glass, she explores transience and light through materiality, while grounding her practice in the subject matter of the everyday. In this current body of work, she focuses specifically on the spoon as a form, although in looking at her work properly you might see that it's always been there. In the work shown in *rydym i gyd yn fregus / we are all fragile*, the spoon, the common, domestic, everyday object, is given intense attention. Bird-Jones holds the spoon close to her body, cradles it against herself, and notices its presence. In doing this, she asks us to look at the spoon in both its sublime simplicity as a form and in the many appearances it makes in our lives.

As a form, the spoon is almost universal. It has a place in most cultures and is instantly and evocatively recognisable. We see it and we easily imagine what it does, what it holds. ¹ Despite, or perhaps even as a result of, its visibility in everyday life, its perceived commonness, the spoon as a form is difficult to actually see. That is, to look at as more than a sum of its parts - as something which holds not just food but meaning, value and beauty. And when we do see these aspects, for example in the tradition of the Welsh love spoon, the form is detached from its function and regarded primarily as symbolic. If we can see the use of a spoon we no longer see its beauty and throw it in a dark kitchen drawer, if we see its beauty we no longer see its use and hang it on a wall out of reach.

Bird-Jones' employs a phenomenological process in her work which counterbalances this. She has been looking at spoons for a long time and asks us to pause and look too. There is no hierarchy in this kind of looking - it begins wherever we encounter spoons in the real world. This exhibition is a celebration of this kind of process. The artist does not separate out the spoon's beauty and form from its use and place in the everyday. The spoons in Bird-Jones' work are not isolated art objects, nor are they just tools, signifiers of the purpose they serve. Rather they occupy a space somewhere in between - where it is possible to appreciate the beauty of form, while recognising the spoon as an always already located object. That is, embedded deeply within layers of cultural, historical and personal context and meaning that we have

imbued it with.

If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solid container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then next day you probably do much the same again - if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all.

² **Ursula Le Guin**, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*

Everyone has a spoon story. At the beginning of this project, Bird-Jones invited people to gather around the idea of the spoon, to bring their own into a conversation and to share their stories around it. This act of collecting, of making points of connection, is central to her work and gives us insight into her affinity with this form. It's these points of connection, between mouth and spoon and spoon and mouth, that are the starting point for a network of fascination that we are invited into. These stories of lived experience, of emotional responses and highly personal narratives, are what Bird-Jones evokes in her practice. The spoon, the tool our mothers used to feed us and perhaps we in turn might use to feed our mothers, describes this structure. This is about what we gather, hold, offer up, and pass on.

Bird-Jones' pieces demand a bodily response from us. We want to move around them, to watch our reflection imperfectly imitate and warp us in the mirrored bowls of the silver spoons, to wrap our hands around the gleaming handles. These are actions we've performed countless times with the spoons in our own homes but now suddenly can't remember when faced with these stretched renditions. We know we've touched thousands of spoons before, but we want to touch these ones. This dialogue between an appreciation of and interest in functionality and the freedom and excitement of play is

inherent throughout Bird-Jones' practice. While considering the idea of something so useful as the spoon, a tool made to serve a purpose, she reminds us of something else, something lying just out of sight, behind the curtain. This curiosity, the urge to reach out and touch something, to hold it, to bring it into the body, to move with it, to lift it up against the light, to twist and turn and see what happens if I do this or this, sustains the constant experimentation that flows through her work.

rydym i gyd yn fregus / we are all fragile is a moment in Bird-Jones practice that might be representative of the way she works. This is not just an exhibition of products, of finished objects, nor is the exhibition a product in itself, but rather it is a moment to pause and look at her process. This current work can be traced back to the artist's first visit to Hawaii in 1990, followed by her solo exhibition, *Evanescence*, at Mission Gallery in 1992. Bird-Jones returned to Hawaii in 2015 and has subsequently produced this new body of work which will once again be shown at the gallery. There is a Hawaiian story that says that we are born with a bowl of pure light. Throughout our lives we gather things, put them in our bowl, fill it up and gradually diminish the light. At any time we can turn the bowl over, emptying what's in it, allowing our bowl of light to shine brightly again. The act of holding is important in Bird-Jones practice, but equally, so is the act of releasing, of sharing and passing on. This exhibition is a glimpse into Bird-Jones' practice, what she has gathered and collected so far, but it is also just another turning of the bowl.

¹ Kacey C Neely, *The Spoon in Phenomenology & Practice*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 28-30, University of Alberta, 2017.

² Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction in Women of Vision*, St Martins Press, 1988.

An essay by Stevie MacKinnon-Smith in response to the exhibition *rydym i gyd yn fregus / we are all fragile* by Chris Bird-Jones.

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