

ANCIENT & MODERN

PRESS RELEASE

DES HUGHES

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ANCIENT & MODERN presents new sculpture by Des Hughes. Hughes' work bears witness to an obsessive, physical enquiry into the materials, methods and traditions of sculpture.

Hughes re-thinks conventional sculptural materials such as plaster, marble, bronze and clay. Nothing is as it first appears. For example crudely modelled clay is meticulously cast in resin but, with the inclusion of marble dust, it may appear to have been carved and polished from a block of stone or, then again, fashioned from a piece of chewing gum.

At the same time Hughes also considers the purpose or meaning of sculpture - from the functional doorstep to the sacred effigy. Traditions are revised as Hughes rethinks ecclesiastical equipment and relics as macabre, joke-shop props or as Modern, abstract sculptural forms (and vice versa).

A pair of sculpted ears, strung together with nylon cord and mounted on the wall ('Middle Ear', 2006), might appear as something of a tribute to Barbara Hepworth or Naum Gabo... and, somehow, Philip Guston's later paintings. One might also consider references to popular culture such as the biblical Malchus, whose ear was detached by St. Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22.45 - 54), or perhaps the opening scenes of David Lynch's 'Blue Velvet' (1986). Hughes' reference points are rarely explicit and the inclusion of two fishing weights do anything but anchor the work to any simple reading.

Another work, 'I haven't been feeling myself lately' (2006), consists of a disembodied hand rendered from processed meats. The work recalls Sigmund Freud's essay 'Das Unheimlich' (1919) which refers to folk tales and classical myths (by, respectively, Hauff and Herodotus) concerning severed hands and 'the savoury smell of a sausage.'

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Hughes has used the motif of the severed hand in a number of works in recent years drawing from a rich vein of legend including that of the 'Hand of Glory' - a device fashioned from the fist of a hanged man by burglars in the Middle Ages (essentially a candle stick that was thought to open doors and ensure that victims were deeply asleep).

The exhibition also includes a Romantic landscape realised as a church font, sunk into the gallery wall ('the Water Table', 2007) and a geometric, votive candle rack, filled with 'gas powered hands of glory' ('I in the Triangle', 2007). The close proximity of a finger font to so many severed hands may bring to mind Rome's Bocca della Verità found in the portico of the Santa Maria in Cosmedin. This circular, stone face (a fragment of a Roman fountain) is said to bite off the hands of liars. And then again, one might also consider the works as a cautionary tale of what happens to those visitors, to exhibitions of sculpture, who fail to heed the warning not to touch.

Previous exhibitions by Des Hughes (b. Birmingham, 1970) include solo presentations at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne (2005), The Showroom, London (2004) and Southampton City Art Gallery (1997). Hughes has also participated in group exhibitions at the Castle Museum, Norwich and Le Musée de Marrekech (both 2005), Hamish McKay, Wellington (2004), Kettle's Yard, Cambridge (2003) and Gimpel Fils, London (2003)

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Exhibition preview: Wednesday 28 February, 6 - 8pm

Open Wednesday - Saturday 12 - 6pm and by appointment.

