

Published in *Art Monthly* 433, February 2020.

Maeve Connolly

Daphne Wright, A Quiet Mutiny

A lone male voice is heard throughout Daphne Wright's exhibition, emanating from a video installed in the upper gallery. *Is everyone okay?*, 2019, presents a sustained close-up of a white man in his sixties or early seventies, with a wrinkled face painted to suggest a lion. He is symbolically putting on a brave face as he shifts between the roles of carer and team leader in a series of exchanges with absent interlocutors. Addressing the camera directly, he both acknowledges and expresses concern ('She's doing much better now', 'Is everyone okay?') before announcing; 'Excuse me, I need to go for a pisssss', extending the ssssss so it seems to fill the air. His odd slippage into the overly-familiar is heard again and again, each time the short video loops. Other works in the exhibition similarly exploit familiarity to disarm and disorient. *Shopping Trolley*, 2019 is positioned near a window overlooking a busy street, facing a large branch of Boots chemist. Constructed partly from unfired clay, its fragile linear form is so immediately recognisable that several visitors walk right past the markings on the gallery floor, as though planning to fill with it groceries, before they realise their mistake.

Nearby, another object elicits instant recognition, but draws from a very different register of knowledge. *Stab Boy*, 2019 lies on the ground, his clay head and limbs carefully separated from his rectangular clay body, from which a clay knife protrudes. This cartoon-like crime scene reads as the (barely) three-dimensional rendering of a child's drawing, which could express a traumatic memory, a disturbing wish or simply an infantile fascination with blood and guts. If *Stab Boy* explores how violence can be mediated through imagery and materiality, *Little Sad Face*, 2019 examines the highly conventionalised expression of sadness in social media. This work is a series of blue-toned watercolours, all based on the sad face emoji, with several accompanied by subtitles (*Alone, Breaktime, Lost, Old, Sulk*) that do the heavy lifting of communication. There are other more oblique allusions to social media in *A Quiet Mutiny*, including *Lost Cat*, 2019. Standing on a plinth that faces the exhibition entrance, this sculptural assemblage was inspired by a poster for a missing pet. The cat one of many cared-for small creatures referenced in the show (other examples include *Pet Amphibians & Reptiles*, 2019 and *Pet Rodents & Rabbits*, 2019) but it alone is identified as 'lost'.

Lost Cat alludes to a kind of sadness that is socially acceptable and easily relatable. But other forms of loss and pain, perhaps less easily articulated, are at the heart of *A Quiet Mutiny*. In works such as *Zimmer*, *Fridge Door*, *Clothes Rack* (all 2019), Wright gives a sculptural dignity to everyday acts and tools of support. A folded cloth forms part of *Zimmer*, hanging over the frame. Its inclusion hints at the agency of the Zimmer-user but it is ultimately ambiguous. *Fridge Door* incorporates a shelf, containing the familiar moulded form of a plastic milk carton. Has the shopping been done, or has the milk gone off? The objects themselves are mute but they function as signs legible to anyone with experience of care work.

The complexities that surround the giving and receiving of care are explored, and poetically vocalised, in a nearby video, *Song of Songs*, 2019, installed in a black box space with audio on headphones. It features an elderly woman and slightly younger man, both seated on the floor of a domestic space, with elegant wooden furniture visible in the background. Sitting behind the woman, the man holds her hands up, as though for display. The words they speak, together or separately, suggest disinhibition and even dementia—‘feeds itself’, ‘monster’—but they remain entirely calm and composed. At one moment, the woman chews with an empty mouth. At another, the man’s mouth moves silently as she turns her face slowly to the camera and sings (beautifully). The shape of her supported body, arms held aloft with elbows bent, loosely resembles the ‘cactus pose’ adopted in certain exercise regimes and succulent plants actually figure among the many organic forms referenced in *A Quiet Mutiny*. But the exhibition’s primary plant form is undoubtedly the sunflower. Propped up by sticks, a row of huge clay sunflowers stand in the upper gallery, facing the window. They are all rooted in buckets that seem long drained of moisture and, having reached their full height, they now bend inexorably towards the ground, both delicate and domineering.