



Claire Ashley
Lumpy Morsels, Hot Rocks



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Cleve Carney Art Gallery
Thursday, Feb. 4 to Saturday, March 19, 2016



Lumpy Morsel: Jelly Roll, 2015, spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin and fans

Claire Ashley's Land and Body-scapes

Claire Ashley's art-making practice is a hybrid of painting and sculpture, and she's staked out a unique vehicle for her work on both accounts through the usage of inflatables. Inspired by kids' bouncy castles coupled with the necessity of using a material compact enough to store inside the small studio space adjacent to her family's home, Ashley's vibrant abstractions are made from air-filled PVC coated tarpaulin.

She creates sewing patterns for the tarpaulin by inventing forms based off of the silhouettes of cloud formations, characters from Sponge Bob cartoons, puffed pastry and the blue prints of her home, but the chief inspiration for her work is the human body. With skins, fat rolls and alternately erect inflation and flaccid deflation, it exhibits anatomic characteristics of both sexes through an orgy of nipple-like protrusions and penis-shaped appendages. It also has a mind of its own, and when not animated by billowing humps, undulating flaps, or rippling puckers, its buoyancy is curtailed by the glass walls it's stuffed up against, the corners it's wedged into, the corridors it's squeezed through, or the walls and ceilings it's tethered by.

Because of its anthropomorphic acts and appearance, each piece has personality. This has even led Ashley to see some past work as oblique self-portraiture. Her role as an artist parent and the soft, safe support structures—such as pillows, mattresses, inner tubes and snowsuits—that also inspire her become conflated with stereotypes of the smothering, monumental mother figure in those pieces. Overall, the lurking omnipresence of pleasure versus pain in her oeuvre is almost a perversity in and of itself.

By extension of all this, some of her sculptures have tended to take on the characteristics of kids, including, for starters, their awkwardness and unpredictability. She serves as their custodian, parenting them as they age by performing routine upkeep and care such as touching up paint, re-sewing split seams and patching tears. Despite all this, the passage of time has also lent them maturation and growth, the results of which are *Lumpy Morsels*, *Hot Rocks*. This exhibition marks a seismic shift for Ashley (pun intended) in terms of her color palette, paint application and scale. It also reveals a smart evolution of the form and behavior of her work.

Chiefly comprised of new sculptural objects, Ashley's neon and metallic palette is somewhat muted here, replaced by softer, quieter colors. As opposed to her typical working method of binding deflated sculptures to spray paint them, or applying a top layer of graffiti-like

mark making, she's opted for a smoother paint application by aerosoling inflated pieces. This has allowed her to slowly and deliberately blend colors together, as well as paint works in the round.

Often her sculpture overwhelms the space it's in, literally expanding to fit or fill its context. But at the Cleve Carney Art Gallery, a cavernous jewel box of 1,800 square feet, Ashley's sculpture has scaled down instead of up, with her installation featuring several smaller pieces that come together to form a holistic composition. Rounder in shape, they take her interest in the parts and functions of the body, and her love of the shapes, colors and decorations of desserts, and combine them with the landscape, both its topography and terrain. Not to be confused with terra firma however, Ashley's rock face is made out of her signature yielding, baggy inflatables.

Instead of a lone Caspar David Friedrich figure contending with the natural world, or an impasto confection on display in a Wayne Thiebaud, there are rocks varying in size from pebble to boulder stacked alongside the shape of a breast or a frosted birthday cake. As the edible, onomatopoeia of the title suggests, *Lumpy Morsels*, *Hot Rocks* is Ashley's version of a mountain; a delectable, land- and body-scape.

Although each object has an individual identity with unique characteristics, they ultimately function as a composite. Whether tightly packed from floor to ceiling, loosely strewn about like rubble, or advancing like the lip of a glacial moraine, the installation transforms the exhibition space into an environment. In order to take it all in, viewers have to travel through it.

Lumpy Morsels also features the largest number of human-scale sculpture Ashley has ever made for a single exhibition. Her work's anthropomorphism has, in the past, led to its further personification through dance, where people suit up in sculptures, legs or arms akimbo, and perform the bouncing, wiggling and hopping around for the work. The evolution of this here happens in conjunction with the exhibition, through a dance performance featuring people who aren't just wearing sculpture, they'll actually be sealed inside of it. Like an umbilical lifeline, just a lone electrical cord will be sticking out to keep the work inflated. It isn't too far off from the aforementioned bouncy castle, except with these dance-costumes-come-kinetic-sculpture, instead of caroming around inside of them, you become completely consumed by them.



The Three Amigos: Slugger, Peely-Wally, and Nubbin, 2015, spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin and fans from the exhibition Lank Limp Lemons Suck, Young World International, Detroit, MI



***Lumpy Morsel: Puff*, 2015, spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin and fans**

Similarly, *Lumpy Morsels, Hot Rocks* is slow to metabolize. Dance performances will last longer, and the sculptures' movement through space will be slower than ever before. The installation itself will force dancers and viewers alike to take their time and scout a preferred pathway through it, or find an ideal vantage point within it, otherwise you risk seeing just parts and not the whole.

Just like metamorphic rock itself, works on view are constantly metamorphosing. Even if it's happening at an imperceptibly slow pace, the ground underneath your feet is shifting, so to speak, and so that small inflatable sculpture up there will appear to be a cherry on top, and then a clitoris, and then back again in the blink of an eye.

These sensations and experiences echo the alchemical metamorphosis Ashley experiences in the studio, and the exhibition embodies her openness to surprises, mistakes and experimentation. With a process-based practice, discoveries and realizations happen through making, and that journey is echoed in this installation. As you weave your way around the works, you realize you can only see where you've been once you've gotten to where you're going.

Ashley's sculpture has evolved over time from brassy, unwieldy and immediate to these smaller, tauter, more controlled and self-contained works. These are not helpless, messy, needy small children, they are big kids who flaunt their self-sufficiency and independence. Their brash "warning system" paint job is nudging toward a tactical camouflage as they adapt to the white cube. Rather than growing to the size of their tank, resulting in restrictions and constrictions, there is a powerful fusion between their human nature and human scale. Instead of context responsive, these works achieve context specificity.

Ashley refers to the evolution of her work in *Lumpy Morsels, Hot Rocks* as a "mangled Darwinism." More mature and aesthetically cohesive, there is an exacting, artistic natural selection at play. Generations of creatures have come before the grouping you see on view here, their creation having inspired new ideas and improvements, actions and reactions. Some were cannibalized, sutured together or used for parts, other times past work is simply sent to the bone yard. The life cycle—or in this case rock cycle—of Ashley's work, and the stages of life they pass through as they're born, age and pass on, implicitly illustrate their darker, more macabre side. They're fun, even funny, but eventually become outgrown or outlasted. Just like in nature, oftentimes when one species evolves, another one goes extinct.



That's not to say they lack her work's characteristic irreverence or ecstasy, or that they've lost the entertainment value or playful raunchiness that's built into their DNA. Instead, Ashley's struck the perfect balance between the slippery dualities she loves to load her work with, such as a mixture of joy and danger, care and harm, and sex and death. At the same time, they are uncanny to the core—are they figurative or abstract? Pornographic, or is that just a puffed pastry? Does their tactility tempt and tease, or does their sensuality ultimately satiate?

Ashley has managed to achieve all this while remaining true to herself and authentic to her non-commercial and anti-elitist artistic ideals. Because of her romantic relationship with art making itself, it's actually been a profound pleasure, and it's obvious in her work, which exudes that esprit. In *Lumpy Morsels*, *Hot Rocks*, Ashley goes to the top of the mountain, and with this body of work, she also proves she is an artist at the top of her game.

—Thea Liberty Nichols

Thea Liberty Nichols is a curator, writer and arts administrator from Chicago.

Center fold and page 12-13: *Installation shot, Distant Landscapes: Peep Dyed Crevice Hot Pink Ridge*, 2013, Icebox Gallery, Crane Arts, Philadelphia, PA; photos courtesy of ICEBOX Gallery





Detail of Lumpy Morsel: Slice, 2015, spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin and fans



Lumpy Morsel: Puff, 2015, spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin and fans



Claire Ashley's Biography

Claire Ashley received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and her BFA from Gray's School of Art (Aberdeen, Scotland). Originally from Edinburgh, Scotland, Ashley is now Chicago based. Currently, she teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Department of Contemporary Practices and the Department of Painting and Drawing. She is represented by Galleri Urbane Marfa + Dallas, TX.

Ashley's recent work investigates inflatables as painting, sculpture, installation and performance costume. These works have been exhibited nationally and internationally in galleries, museums, and site-specific installations, performances and collaborations. Her work has been shown at venues such as DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum (Lincoln, MA), Helen Day Art Center (Stowe, VT), Disjecta Contemporary Art Center (Portland, OR), Columbus College of Art and Design (Columbus, OH), Bedford Gallery (Walnut Creek, CA), Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center (Austin, TX), Art Gallery of Mississauga (Mississauga, ON, CAN), The Chicago Cultural Center, Bahamas Biennial (Milwaukee, WI), Art Santa Fe (Santa Fe, NM), Rockford Art Museum (Rockford, IL), Arizona State University Museum (Phoenix, AZ), and the Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, IL). Additionally, her work has been exhibited in the UK: The Tetley Center for Contemporary Art (Leeds, England), The House for an Art Lover (Glasgow, Scotland), gallerA1 (Edinburgh, Scotland) and The Highland Institute for Contemporary Art (Inverness, Scotland). Her work has been featured in publications such as *Sculpture Magazine*, *Art Papers*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Time Out Chicago* and *Condé Nast Traveller* (European).

To learn more, go to claireashley.com.

The Big Mofos: Blubberduckie and Hunnybunny, 2014, spray paint on PVC coated canvas and fans from the exhibition Lank Limp Lemons Suck, Young World International, Detroit, MI

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The Cleve Carney Art Gallery would like to thank Claire Ashley for putting together this dynamic and exciting exhibition, Thea Nichols for writing a thoughtful essay and all of the students from College of DuPage who helped to install and produce this show.

Justin Witte
Director and Curator
Cleve Carney Art Gallery



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Front cover: **Lumpy Morsel: Puff**, 2015, spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin and fans
Inside front cover: **Still from Double Disco**, 2012, performers Joseph Ravens and Victoria Bradford, Defibrillator Performance Space, Chicago
Inside back cover: **Still from Dumb Double Disco Ideas**, 2013, performers Christopher Knowlton and Blake Russell, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Back cover: **Deflated Lumpy Morsel: Slice**, 2015, spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin and fans





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