

## Text by Isabel Walter

The process of making plastic is labour intensive. First, crude oil is extracted from the ground, bored out with drills and pumps. Then the oil is taken to a refinery where, once heated, a material called nafta is siphoned off. Through a complex procession of processes such as heating, cracking, polymerisation, fusing, extruding and moulding, the raw, crude oil emerges, reborn, as a hairbrush, water bottle, or piece of lego. The process is extractive, swallowing up resources, time and energy. Spitting out *stuff* in return, at an incomprehensible pace. Plastic, though, in many ways destructive to planetary and human health, is useful because it can take on many different qualities and forms, tensions and flexibilities.

The works in *Virgin Plastic* at Martin van Zomeren share some of these same slippery, shape-shifting qualities as plastic. Artists Abbas Zahedi, Tobias Grann, Kristján Steinn, Ty Locke and Elizabeth Orr, take the existing, familiar and everyday as the starting point for their works. Largely using found objects, they are manipulated to various degrees, not to trick the viewer, but rather to challenge one's perception of the purpose and possibilities of these items.

The most common form of plastic manufacturing is called injection moulding. Molten plastic pellets are inserted into a mould, left to cool, and then emerge, reborn in the image of the new item. In this way, a plastic chair is made more as a representation of a chair than a chair itself. It is plastic, moulded in the image of that which was once crafted from wood or steel. Plastic offers new forms of representation, the very plasticity of the material allowing it to take on the appearance of others, often indistinguishable from the original.

One of Abbas Zahedi's *Exit Signs* is placed at the entrance of the exhibition. A white electrical box houses a bright green exit light, except an outstretched muscular arm suggests the direction of travel, rather than an arrow. The figure's head is downturned, arm outstretched, fingers making the shape of a gun. The work is theatrical and familiar at the same time, guiding the viewer into the space, with a knowing nod.

Elizabeth Orr's *Straight Edge I*, is made from a steel ruler, bent into a circle, devoid of function yet refigured as a sculptural ouroboros, chewing its own tail, measuring nothing but itself. Both Orr and Zahedi play with this familiarity of objects, reformulating them to shift their meaning. Their work is infused with a cheekiness, a playful knowingness. The works no longer serve their intended purpose, sitting at the uncanny point between the familiar and the sinister.

Objects form a kind of language through which we learn to navigate the world, through which we contextualise and evaluate our surroundings, make judgements about people and situations and things. Often, we're so accustomed to this language that it operates in silence, informing our understanding of the world yet going unchecked. It's only when they pull us out of ourselves, forcing us to recognise the assumptions that we make, that we can really begin to read the visual codes we live by. By taking on new forms and recontextualising old ones, these works rewrite this language of assumptions.

Sitting squarely in the space is *Leather Jacket Barstool*, a sculpture by Ty Locke. Inspired by the jackets left by regulars at his local pub, reserving their spot while popping to the bathroom or going for a smoke. The artist has merged seat and jacket, the leather smothering the legs of the chair like a skin or a web growing over it. Locke's sculpture is immediately familiar enough to conjure memories

yet distinct enough to force the viewer to look twice. What was once a stool is now a hunched, creeping creature, is now a distant, nicotine-infused memory from late adolescence.

Hanging in the centre of the space are two large, metal structures by Kristján Steinn, the hollowed-out remains of double mattresses, titled *Spring Quartet*. Facing one another, they are strung up from the ceiling, connected to a collection of wires – electrically choreographed hammers beat the springs, the strange sound is picked up and amplified through speakers. It reverberates through the gallery, demarcating space and manipulating it. The sound fills the gallery and hollows it out at the same time, the resulting music a haunting trace of the materiality of decay, the twisted metal repurposed as a rhythmic instrument.

Tobias Grann's found-object sculpture *Untitled (Face lift razor blade)* appears in multiple iterations throughout the space. A red, rubber line bisects the white cube walls, embossed with the company name 'FaceLift® RazrBLADE.' This object, a rubber insert used for cleaning windows, is usually hidden, at most glanced at. The name of the object, removed from its usual purpose, takes on a new, more sinister context.

In *Virgin Plastic*, both space and objects are manipulated, materials have been twisted, recontextualised and repurposed. And thus, emotions, expectations and understanding become embroiled in this manipulation, too. The uncanny space which the objects occupy, as our immediate responses are usurped by a second glance.

In this manipulation, this repurposing and reconfiguring of objects and meanings, the artists create friction. In his book 'Topology of Violence,' Byung-Chul Han writes about our increasing presence in online spaces, stating that "in these imaginary virtual spaces, the narcissistic ego mainly encounters itself. Virtualisation and digitisation are increasingly contributing to the disappearance of the real, which is noted above all for the resistance it provides." He continues, stating "not only does [reality] interrupt or resist, it also provides support and a foothold." For Han, friction is a necessary component of reality, giving us something to hold on to, but also forcing us to acknowledge an *other*, and thus helping us to reign in the ego.

A lack of friction leads to polarisation. Thoughtful engagement requires plasticity. A lack of friction causes deterioration. Genuine understanding requires plasticity.

The act of looking, not glancing, requires consideration and commitment. The act of looking, not once, but twice, leads to a more empathetic, critical understanding of the language which we use to decode the world around us. These works play with the language of forced second looks, of double meanings and knowing glances. It is their very plasticity, their ability to shapeshift, to take on new qualities and forms, tensions and flexibilities, that creates friction, acting as a buffer to the "disappearance of the real."