

***Amalgam* — Lauren Downton**

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by Josephine Mead

*Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that.*¹ – Rosi Braidotti

Amalgam by Lauren Downton considers what it means to be human—through ceramic and sculptural practice, through personal experience, and through the conditions that we collectively find ourselves in—socially, physically and psychologically. At this current juncture in time, we humans are de-centralised, multifarious and ever-becoming. Now more than ever the livelihood of the natural environments that surround us are contingent on our evolution, as we are on theirs. Downton’s practice celebrates this interconnectedness, echoing notions of material vibrancy that lead to ideas of posthuman connection, as considered by the likes of cultural theorists Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett. Braidotti’s ideas of a posthuman ethics are signalled at through Downton’s practice, which “proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism.”² By decentring the human to sit in-line with its natural counterparts, rather than above them, Downton is building a worldview of a future where interspecies connections and our relation to different forms of detritus combine to create a more unified whole. Art becomes the conduit to build this new becoming.

Downton breaks down hierarchies of matter, assembling casts of found detritus—both natural, (such as whiskers, fleece leaves, branches and antlers) and manmade (such as discarded plastic) aside casts and forms that suggest human and animal bodies. Through combining these forms in her sculptural assemblages, she allows the various elements to be on equal playing fields. It is the dismantling of hierarchies between human matter, natural matter, and inorganic matter that makes Downton’s work, and the work of said cultural theorists, of interest and very ripe for possibilities of future world-making. In the words of Braidotti, “in the ontological gap thus opened, other species come galloping in.”³ One is encouraged to consider what other species or other possibilities it is that Downton is creating space for.

Bennet defines assemblages as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within [...] Assemblages are not governed by any central head.”⁴ When speaking about combining different forms, Downton notes, “when thinking through ideas of entanglement and enmeshment, it becomes so hard to define where we begin and end.”⁵

Having grown up in rural South Africa, on a farm surrounded by wildlife, and now residing in the forested foothills of Kurna Country, Downton’s life has been shaped by her experiences of natural environments. Her practice echoes processes of grafting in horticultural contexts, where two specimens will be fused together to grow a new hybridized form. In a prophetic fashion,

¹ Rosi Braidotti, *The posthuman*. (Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2013), 1.

² Rosi Braidotti, *The posthuman*. (Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2013), 49-50.

³ Rosi Braidotti, *The posthuman*. (Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2013), 67.

⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 23-24.

⁵ Conversation with Lauren Downton, August 2024.

when referring to Francisco Varela's distinction between autopoietic (self-organizing) and allopoietic systems, Felix Guattari has unintentionally and pre-emptively summed up what Downton is achieving: "by extending "the principle of autopoiesis (which for Varela is reserved for the biological organisms) to cover also the machines or technological others"⁶ Guattari defines an "autopoietic subjectivation, or self-styling, [which] accounts both for living organisms, humans as self-organizing systems, and also for inorganic matter, the machines."⁷ Both Guattari and Downton are interested in how human and non-human can meet in order to re-organize.

The liminal spaces that exist between life and death foreshadow the work. Possibilities for growth meet notions of dormancy, as non-living and discarded detritus is collected, and considering through the different stages of life-cycles that it has passed through. Forms that once held a function, then moved to disuse, are collected by Downton and cast to live anew. Through ceramic process and sculptural assemblage, a type of propagation or regeneration is enacted. Acts of grafting can be seen as a metaphor for processes of artmaking. Artists collect, assemble and distil—physically and conceptually. As Bennett suggests, "An actant is [...] an "intervener,"⁸ An operator is that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event." It is Downton's body—the body of an artist—that is the main actant in this creative ecology. As actant, Downton briefly places herself, as artist, at the top of the hierarchy, to draw our attention to the self-organising potential of the matter she is working with—an act that again re-organises said hierarchy and places her body on the same level of action and effect as the materials she is using. Downton reminds us that all is connected, that we are in endless stages of becoming, and that we are never far from death and rebirth.

Working between life and death; object and ghost, matter and non-matter, Downton examines our states of permanency, transition and decay through human and non-human worlds . With a deep understanding of how matter "has a life outside of us," this is work that calls for empathy towards all elements of our world. As Braidotti quotes Blanchot, "art is [...] cosmic in its resonance and hence posthuman by structure, as it carries us to the limits of what our embodied selves can do or endure. In so far as art stretches the boundaries of representation to the utmost, it reaches the limits of life itself and thus confronts the horizon of death. To this effect, art is linked to death as the experience of limits."⁹ Downton is bringing disparate parts together so we can build our collective tolerance to meet future limits.

⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *The posthuman*. (Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2013), 94.

⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *The posthuman*. (Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2013), 94.

⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 25-26.

⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *The posthuman*. (Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2013), 107.