

LONDON

# POLLY MORGAN

## FOR SNAKE'S SAKE – EXPLORING THE MALLEABILITY OF DEAD ANIMALS

Polly Morgan's studio space is on the ground floor of a former shellac factory in Hackney Wick, East London. It's here that Morgan (34), one of Britain's most original young artists, lives and works. Neighbours include Jake and Dinos Chapman and light artist Martin Richman.

Largely self-taught, Morgan's decade-long career demonstrates a fascinating evolution. Her practice is based on a very British take on the art of taxidermy, successfully combining all manner of disparate skills and specialities – from surgical to sculptural – which contemplate, deconstruct and reinvigorate the practice of presenting dead animals within an artistic context.

Sleek steps through the studio doors and is immediately greeted by a pirouetting, barking bundle of black-and-tan fur, which turns out to be one of Morgan's two dogs, Tony. Her other, a lugubrious Staffordshire Bull Terrier named



Trotsky, disdains the perpetual whine of the power drill and seeks refuge in her Jeep, parked outside.

Within, Morgan is hunched over a workbench, shaping a freshly-cast red rubber mould of a snake. Scattered about the studio are chunks of wood and marble, a cuboid sculpture of cast crow-leg bones, Stanley knives glinting in lamp-light, and a mound of dead serpents. Humming freezers in a rear storeroom reveal an enormous eight-foot python, a cat, a baby boar, "hundreds" of birds of varying types and Trotsky's dismembered testicles. Chalked on the cabinet doors are the contents within, various breeds of birds and



mammals, one door is marked "STILL BIRTHS". Polly and her team are hard at work when Sleek visits, finishing up a set of brand new sculptures destined for exhibition at Other Criteria, Damien Hirst's publishing house-cum-art gallery space, specialising in editions from international artists in New York this autumn. It's her first solo show in the States and she's using the opportunity to explore, perhaps in greater depth than at anytime previously during her career, the uniquely unfolding potential of sculpture. Snakes lend themselves particularly well to sculpture.

"I've chosen snakes for their structure and malleability," Morgan explains. "But I've never really been interested in any symbolism behind them, or the fear aspect. I'm thinking of them purely as sculptural devices."

Unlike some of her earlier works, which tended towards setting chicks, rats, birds and the odd dismembered pigeon within darkly charming settings, these newer pieces are not intended to convey a narrative. Partly, this is a reaction to the flood of imitators that have sprung up in Morgan's wake and have contributed to something of a taxidermy trend among London's

aspiring arterati. Polly acknowledges the recent popularity of taxidermy but quietly places herself elsewhere. "I don't know many other taxidermists. They tend to be wildlife enthusiasts – they're slightly outsiders, and I've always identified myself as one too. My absolute horror in life is being part of an in-crowd."

Mostly, her new body of work shows a shift from taxidermy as the central component of her works to it being pressed into the service of formal experimentation. With their swirling, vertiginous forms that recall Modernist sculpture, Morgan eschews the mythological associations of the snake – the ouroboric, eternally-looping forms that have beguiled philosophers, artists and mystics over the years – in favour of striking juxtapositions of erupting snake on stone,

marble or wooden plinths.

"Putting the snakes in natural positions is a way to appreciate them formally," she says. "I



think of a snake as a short fat oblong object or a skinny long one. Their shapes actually vary widely, the bodies are so malleable. When I de-frost and shape them, they act so differently." AM

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