**Emma Hart: Banger, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 27 Oct 18 – 3 Feb 19**

As a visitor, there is sometimes a sense that you know what you’re going to get at the Fruitmarket Gallery - not least, as a lecturer in a Scottish art school, a hundred undergraduate essays on the latest show. Over the last decade or so, the Fruitmarket’s offerings have tended towards a combination of one or more of: Scottish artists who were big in the ‘90s; an art historical thesis-as-exhibition; scaled-up neo-formalist sculpture; or the latest curatorial trend, slightly after the fact. While this perception is perhaps unfair (see, for example, outstanding work by Lee Lozano, William Kentridge and Vivienne Koorlands) it is nevertheless true to say that visitors are rarely *surprised* by what they encounter*.*

It may well be that it is the gallery’s dated corporate branding which gives off the whiff of an inflexible house-style or something to do with the standard café-bookshop-education room configuration of the place. The latest show, though, is a hard one to call. It fits with what we might expect of the gallery’s taste – bold, colourful, installation work which (from a distance) veers towards what Alex Coles and others have deemed ‘Design Art’ in its aesthetic – but the themes and ideas explored are more expansive, less easy to categorise. Here, London-based artist Emma Hart presents two discrete exhibitions *Mamma Mia!* (2017) on the ground floor and a group of new sculptures collectively titled *Banger* (2018) directly above, on the first floor. *Mamma Mia!*, shown at the Whitechapel Gallery last year, is the result of Hart’s residency in Italy in 2016, awarded as part of the Max Mara Art Prize for Women for which Fiona Bradley, Director of Fruitmarket, was one of the judges.

Ceramics take centre-stage as the unifying medium across both bodies of work. In Mamma Mia! these take the form of a family group of eleven large sculptural ‘lamps’. These large objects could also be read as heads or helmets, with noses and rounded skulls. Equally, they could be upended measuring jugs, with spouts and fill lines. Whatever they are, ten are suspended from the ceiling, one lies on the gallery floor and all are linked by red electrical cables, binding them together. In places, the cables zigzag like a heart monitor, while interspersed throughout are ceiling fans in the shape of oversized cutlery, whirring ominously just above head height. Standing directly beneath the ‘heads’ we can look up to see their hollow interiors. From this vantage point, the glossy monochrome exteriors give way to saturated colour (bright red, yellow, blue, green) and pattern. Inscribed with abstracted tears, fingers and eyelids, the ‘heads’ are illuminated from inside and cast shadows in the shape of speech bubbles on the gallery floor, adding to the personification these glamorous, absurdist objects.

As a whole, the works allude to emotive conversation, domestic disputes, family dinners. And while tonally, there is something of the witty Italian postmodern design of Ettore Sottsass and his Memphis peers, the finish is resolutely less slick, more obviously handmade, beautiful but a little clunky. During Hart’s residency in Italy, her research for what would become this body of work included time spent at a psychotherapy school in Milan, specialising in family therapy, a period in Rome looking at funerary sculpture and a further period studying in ceramic techniques in Faenza, during which Hart focussed specifically on learning the technical skills required to make faience, the majolica-ware tin-glazed earthenware pottery historically produced in the city. *Mamma Mia!* gathers together these experiences and themes to form a synthesised manifestation of the artist’s concerns in the manner of expanded object theatre. What at first glance around the gallery entrance looks like *another* heart-sinking sculptural nod to Modernist design or one more brash, neo-formal installation has, on closer inspection far more substance, a welcome sense of humour and much more heart.

In the companion show, *Banger*, Hart extends her interest in producing large-scale, sculptural ceramics, a material with serious currency in contemporary art (see, for example, Phaidon’s 2017 *Vitamin C: Clay and Ceramic in Contemporary Art*, Phil Root and Giles Round’s Grantchester Pottery, the recent Betty Woodman show at ICA, Aaron Angell’s Troy Town Art Pottery and countless other examples including Hart’s recent work with Jonathan Baldock in the *Love Life* (2016-7) exhibitions). While ceramics departments continue to close and kilns are in short supply in UK art schools, a huge resurgence of interest in these materials has taken place amongst artists over the last decade or so. While Hart has worked across sculpture, photography, film and installation, she has said that she turned to ceramics as a way to find ‘the real’ in art, seeing clay as ‘an exciting way to talk about chaos’. Both exhibitions necessitate the audience to physically negotiate and navigate the works. As in *Mamma Mia!,* visual puns abound in *Banger* and the effect can be both playful and disorientating. Headlights in a rear-view mirror face you as you ascend the stairs, two of the four double-sided car windscreen sculptures flank the entrance and exit of the space, forcing you to walk around them, while a crash barrier *Gatecrasher* similarly seems to bar the way. Many of the titles here, *Slippery Sloped, Wipe Out, Dark Past, Totalled*, imply violence, danger, loss of control. But in the detail, the pattern and decoration of the tiles (windscreens) is exquisite, offering real, visual pleasure through a gorgeous, decorative fusion of colour and form much like geometric Art Deco or Suprematist textiles. While the beauty of these objects may seem at odds with their ostensible, low-fi subject matter, it is worth remembering that car culture, too, is obsessed with surface and pattern, with modification and ‘pimping rides’. *Bangers*, after all, have hand-painted exteriors, sports steering wheels, reupholstered seats, vinyl decoration. As a category, they suggest a perilously close proximity to threadbare tyres, sports steering wheels, tied-on exhausts, to danger, obsolescence, to being *clapped out*. In this, Banger could be seen as an extension or development of Hart’s earlier show *Car Crash*, at held at Gallery Lejeune in 2016. While less overtly about collision, object theatre and choreography (as in Mamma Mia!) are again implied in *Banger*: situations are reversed, bodies are part-machine and insides become outsides, the works could be giant props, waiting to be moved, reconfigured, activated.

**Susannah Thompson**