Our most basic, sophisticated selves
Jes Fernie

I often think about how sculptures are stored. They take up so much space and the people who make them often don't have the funds to house them. They spend most of their lives in blind darkness – you could say that this is their natural state, beyond the brief moment they are brought out for public viewing. Or perhaps they are destroyed in order to create space for new things. Somebody told me that before Phyllida Barlow was PHYLLIDA BARLOW she threw her sculptures into The Thames under cover of night because they were too big and unwieldy to keep in her house. A singular, performative gesture that is steeped in drama, loneliness and subterfuge. And of course, sometimes sculptures are reinvented by their authors, taking on a new life in another guise; necessity creating the conditions for magical thinking.

Sarah Ryder stores and remakes her sculptures in the most beguiling of ways. They are made from household foil - a light, flimsy material found in kitchen drawers the world over. But when she glues these sheets together they assume the form of heavy, weighty things - things that take up a lot of space and demand our attention. When the need arises, Ryder neatly folds these unruly, overflowing structures into perfectly formed, compressed squares and files them in cupboards, like album sleeves, in the basement of her house. At a later point, they become the raw material for new works and are given new titles, accreting stories and memory traces in the process.

Apart from being a pleasing solution to a practical problem, this file-and-retrieve approach articulates Ryder's life-long commitment to challenging power structures and systems of control that dictate the way we live, act and make art. The counter-appropriation of everyday raw material give her sculptures a democratic feel, working against the machinery of commodification and control embedded within capitalist systems and more directly, the artworld. They refuse to retain a consistent form that can be bought, sold and consumed in any straightforward way; they are messy, they droop and degrade, they revel in their own anarchic materiality and seep into places they aren't invited into (her studio is tiny - the work expands into other parts of the house); they are made with the full investment of her body, foil laid out on the floor or hung from the wall, with Ryder's arms, hands, legs, feet applying paint to surface, grasping for space just beyond reach. They move 'in an "off" register, embracing tangents, zigzags, sidesteps, doubling back and stumbling forward again'.[1]

I'm hesitant to use the word 'anarchic' in relation to an artist or their practice – it has lost its power in recent years – but there is an urgent sense of refusal that aligns Ryder's work with the writing of foundational feminist anarchists such as

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[1] *Making a Mess: Expanding Anarchist and Feminist Worlds*, Anastasia Murney. Published by Coils of the Serpent, The University of New South Wales, 2023.

Emma Goldman (1869 - 1940). This radical thinker spoke of anarchy as a natural order, arising out of the community and solidarity of interests. Yes, she wanted to abolish the state, institute free love and get rid of prisons, but she conceived all this with a heady combination of rigorous, critical thinking and reckless abandon. She wanted to be truly free and, as a woman, she understood that her project differed from that of her male peers. She was famously reprimanded by a fellow anarchist for dancing at a public meeting: 'it doesn't behoove an agitator to dance', he said; to which she absolutely did not reply 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution', even though this was the sentiment for which she is remembered a hundred years on. As a working class woman with meagre resources who constantly resists being contorted by the system, Ryder has found a home in Goldman's anarcha-feminism, a movement that insists on the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression and seeks to create a society free from hierarchy and domination. But also, crucially, Goldman's quite beautiful attempt to combine rigour with freedom and abandon is closely aligned to Ryder's practice. While she steadfastly employs all her skill, focus, faculties and convictions to make her sculptures there are always moments when she lets go, removing herself from the equation to allow the artwork to become what it needs to be. It is a serious, joyful process that merges Ryder's political convictions with the way she lives her life. This is life and art as activism; neither can be disentangled from the other.

This generosity extends to the way that audiences are invited to experience Ryder's sculptures. There is no prescribed route or hint of a beginning and end, and there are no diktats concerning modes of acceptable behaviour in the gallery space. Ryder wants us to feel, respond to, walk around and revel in these works in any way that feels right or strange or interesting to us. These secreted, cave-like, feral structures create multiple viewpoints that we are invited to experience with our bodies, our minds, our eyes, our most basic, sophisticated selves.

The question so often posed by artists who align themselves with a political cause is: What can art *do*? How can the work I produce in my studio, as a solo-practitioner, make a difference? Ryder is clear that her aim is to construct a two-way relationship with her audiences in order to energise both them and her - to create a connection that produces a feeling of possibility in all parties. At the very least, to not feel so alone. Enter Emma Goldman once again, with her unorthodox view that the individual is a catalyst for the collective. Artists, thinkers and agitators, she said, are able to open up new pathways of imagination that could be adopted by a movement or embedded within a public psyche. It is the feeling of liberation and agency that Ryder aims to instil in those who experience her work. Come and join the party.

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Multiferals, Sarah Ryder, Exeter Phoenix exhibition

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