



Soap Score

honor freeman

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Honor Freeman is represented by Sabbia Gallery, Sydney, sabiagallery.com

Design: Sandra Elms Design Photography: Craig Arnold

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Soap Score (detail), 2016, slip cast porcelain, 656 components

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the care-full craft of lifetimes

For over a decade Honor Freeman has been an alchemist of domestic clutter, transforming strewn Tupperware, worn sponges or soap shards into pastel porcelain accumulations. When together, her small-scale stacks of slip-cast stuff invoke the daily (or more realistically weekly/monthly) rhythms of homes; an unending cycle of cleaning, unknowingly accruing and organising against the dis-orders of dwelling.

In 2015 though Freeman came across the claim that an average human will use 656 bars of soap in their lifetime. In response she has expanded her practice to life-sized proportions to re-create the slivery and worn-down remains of seventy eight and a half years' worth of soap use. During a lifetime soap exists with us as a material companion and fragrant source of comfort; soft, sweet and sudsy. It is with us at our most vulnerable, skin bared and cleansing away the ingrained grime from living. While some of these soaps are Freeman's, many have arrived in the post as floral-scented offerings, preciously wrapped awaiting more permanent fixing in their state of wear. Much faster than their people, these bars have shrunk with regular use, become creviced, flaky, and worn down into oddly intimate shapes determined by the handling of specific individuals. When exhibited together this mass of hand-carved and hand-sanded porcelain soap becomes monument to the personalised rhythms of cleanliness and care-full acts of which every lifetime consists.

Alongside soap's practical role in the washing away of dirt, using soap has been just as potent as a cultural practice; specifically in those cultures occupying muddy territory. As academic Victoria Kelley has explored, behind soap's deceptively benign exterior and sweet fragrance lingers the whiff of nineteenth-century propagandist regimes of care, comfort and control. Throughout the colonisation of Australia the consumption of soap grew exponentially, fuelled by attitudes and advertising which promoted a very British and white middle-class standard of cleanliness. The 'respectable' soap-clean body (and home) sustained boundaries and these were delineated by ritualised and habitual practices of cleanliness to keep the spectres of disorder, disease, destitution and lament outside; the lather, scrub and rinse pattern evoking the façade of comfort and control. Yet in the Victorian period, whose echoes radiate still today, it was women who were burdened with maintaining the arduous and inexhaustible repetitive routines of cleaning and caring for the entire family as well as all their material possessions. Despite a mother's routines being regularly derided as mundane, or taken for granted, their ingrained necessity and never-ending-ness has for many generations exerted control over women's labour and time.

In reaction to lifetimes spent 'chasing dirt' feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir (in 1949) claimed that 'all this halting of decay is also a denial of life', particularly women's lives. And in the 1970s second wave feminist thinkers continued to challenge the 'labour of love' assumption once attributed to what had hitherto been seen as 'women's work' (also known as unpaid and undervalued home-bound work). This and more has led to a current call to recognise the contribution and work of 'care', to finally

acknowledge its legacy while disentangling its future from its oppressive gendered history. Whether in the form of cleaning, child-rearing, cooking, practising art, being a friend and so on, rather than being the denial of life de Beauvoir lamented, care may one day be seen for what it always has been, an ungendered force of life-making. Care-full acts, performed in the home and out, are the backbones of well-functioning cultures. For a carer's work requires that physical attentiveness be met with 'mental states of engagement'; that time attending repetitively towards the focus be done well and responsively if it is to constitute as 'care'. In Freeman's project the humble worn bars of soap, carefully re-crafted, are bearer of these intentions, histories, and tributes. Porcelain, like soap as well as many acts of care, has to it a slipperiness and propensity to dissolve. They are all too soon invisible, immaterial or have slipped away as if they had never been (an eaten meal, recently-washed-now-soiled clothes). To use craft to pause the dissolution of soap in states of grime encrusted wear lets them be reminders of the importance of the work of cleanliness and care.

There is a significant dynamic operating between care and craft, with time and repetition as essential ingredients. Craft, not as a noun but as the verb for achieving skilful innovation that Tim Ingold and numerous contemporary craft theorists have argued for, relies upon a commitment to repetition that is focussed, self-aware and relational. Contrary to expectation, repetition, or the time taken to re-enact again and again with attentive care, does not promote sameness. Instead, repetition that responds to shifting conditions (weather, material idiosyncrasies, emotional states, and unexpected happenings) undertakes incremental revelations which can only be learned through doing. On a practical level care-full crafting at the magnitude of Freeman's 656 component undertaking, requires a long term commitment; years and months divvied into repeated tasks, in this case mold making, colouring, casting, carving, firing, sanding and griming. The scale of this project, borne amidst the obligation of other life duties, has once-in-one-lifetime significance. While art undertaken over long periods regularly attracts the label 'endurance', stamina and duty play equally important roles against the doubts and tiredness that inevitably hover near unforeseeable endpoints. Stamina and duty are less about enduring and more about personal obligation to repetitive rhythms. When these envelop the maker to become meditative, a kind of comfort can be sought and otherwise undiscoverable discoveries realised. Freeman's giving over and into the generative abilities of care-full practices, brings together life with craft and pays homage to an ethic of care which has underpinned human and non-human relationships across the ages but for which recognition has been long overdue.

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