



Press Release

Jonathan Baldock: Touch Wood

The Weston Gallery

23 September 2023 – 7 July 2024

Jonathan Baldock's new exhibition *Touch Wood* at The Weston Gallery is a joyous, sensory feast taking inspiration from medieval sculpture, sacred geometry, the seasons and folk motifs.



Installation view: Jonathan Baldock, *I'm Still Learning*, solo exhibition, La Casa Encendida, Madrid, Spain (2021). Copyright Jonathan Baldock. Courtesy the artist and La Casa Encendida. Photo by Bego Solís.

Jonathan Baldock's distinctive sculptural installations are immersive environments where colour, texture, scent, sound and humour combine with storytelling and enigmatic characters. Their sensory appeal is underpinned by an unsettling quality, like entering an unknown ritual. Myth, folklore and paganism, with their shapeshifting and fluid creatures, are central to the artist's work, which offers space to reimagine queer and working people's histories, explore hidden narratives and create alternative realities.

For *Touch Wood* in YSP's Weston Gallery, Baldock will create a completely new body of work, embracing textile sculpture and hangings, ceramic sculpture, and an evocative soundscape, created by musician Luke Barton, that unites the show's themes through song and sampled audio. The artist's overarching imagery for the exhibition has its origins in the fifteenth-century misericords and carved wooden figures from the quire* of nearby Wakefield Cathedral. Misericords are the protruding, carved shelves concealed underneath folding seats that offered an inconspicuous place to lean and rest while standing to recite

prayers of the medieval church. As the misericords were hidden out of sight, the craftspeople who carved them were given secretive freedom in their creation, and their subject matter relates more closely to nature's bounty or to mythical beasts than it does to overtly religious iconography.

For his exhibition at YSP, Baldock riffs off these characters, with large-scale textile sculptures including a phoenix, a Green Man, and a humorous 'tumbler' who bends at the waist to look backwards through his legs whilst exposing his buttocks, embodying the bawdy imagery that was common in medieval times, even within churches. These 500-year-old sculptures inspire Baldock on several levels. As an artist, he enjoys the idea that their makers found pockets of joy in expressing themselves freely outside of the rules. As someone from a working-class background, he connects to the non-authoritarian voice of the craftsperson. As a queer person, he sees the misericords as objects that have survived the repressive ideals of history – they are subversive outsiders hiding in plain sight. Baldock's own versions will introduce colour, texture, and embellishments through folk motifs. The relationship between concealment and visibility is one that resonates with the lives of many LGBTQIA+ people – to pass underneath the heteronormative radar, secrecy can at times equate to safety.

Baldock has a deep-rooted affinity to nature as he hails from generations of hop-gatherers and gardeners who have had a physical, emotional and sustaining relationship with the land. At the centre of the gallery are four textile panels, each representing a different season, and hung in a circle to create a distinct, jewel-like space in the heart of the room. From the paler pastel shades of spring to the rusty tones of autumn, they capture the natural rhythms of a year. Embroidered onto each panel are designs inspired by sacred geometry – the shapes and growth patterns found throughout the natural world that connect all living things. Other textile hangings will form columns in the gallery, suggesting ecclesiastical architecture yet celebrating the earthly seasons.

Casts of the artist's own face and body parts, as well as those of his mother and partner, feature as flower heads and fragmented appendages attached to, or emerging from, ceramic vessels. Their inclusion binds them together within objects that celebrate the presence of the maker, human relationships, how we hold onto people, and queer love. The ceramics also link to the carvings in Wakefield Cathedral, with one work hinting at a Green Man that has two faces like Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and doorways, who is represented with one face looking backwards and one forwards. Baldock features his own face on one side of a flower and his mother's on the other, inextricably linking them in one moment in time at the threshold of the past and the future. Filling the gallery is a sound work that draws on and melds together the myriad themes and motifs of the show. It features samples of Gregorian chants, medieval and folk songs, recordings of plants growing and birdsong.

The exhibition's title, *Touch Wood*, is many layered and loaded with innuendo. Materially, it refers to the medieval carved figures from which the artist's ideas grew. Superstition and belief systems also play a part, as the phrase and associated action relate to the desire for future events to go our way and not be jinxed by evil forces. The exact origin of this concept isn't certain but may derive from an ancient pagan view that spirits reside in trees and that by touching them we invoke their protection. This type of superstitious and shielding gesture is also represented by the symbols Baldock uses across the exhibition that echo the medieval graffiti protection marks found in churches that were thought to ward off the 'evil eye'.

Baldock's working techniques draw on past trades and crafts – making skills that have been passed down through generations for practical purposes and which sit at the intersection between art and craft, a place of tension that he playfully inhabits. His materials are of the earth: clay and natural fibres. Avoiding nostalgia, he focuses on *"the power of making things, the bringing together of head and hand"*, explored through bodily labour, the haptic experience of making by hand, and time-consuming, traditional and self-taught processes.

Sarah Coulson, Senior Curator at YSP, says: *"I'm excited to see how Jonathan is so deftly weaving together influences from many different times and spheres, and interpreting them through a contemporary, queer lens. The connection to the carvings in Wakefield Cathedral celebrates the history of sculpture and makers locally, whilst his interest in the natural world and the rhythm of the seasons resonates with the landscape at YSP. Jonathan is a dynamic, thoughtful and playful artist whose installations bring joy as well as challenge."*

* The quire is the area of a church or cathedral that provides seating for the clergy and church choir.

Jonathan Baldock: joy through the senses

13 September 2023 – 7 January 2023

This free exhibition in Charleston's new space in central Lewes is the first UK survey show for Jonathan Baldock. It brings together dynamic large-scale sculptural pieces for a colourful and rich immersive experience. Creating a world populated by surreal characters, Baldock works with a range of natural materials including clay, hessian, wool and wicker, using craft traditions such as weaving, embroidery, clay moulding and storytelling.

Inspired by the Bloomsbury group's house and garden at Charleston in Firle, this exhibition explores the threshold of home and garden, the place between internal and external worlds. Baldock asks us to consider our connection to the earth, what has come before us and how we honour those traditions and people.

-ENDS-



Installation view: Jonathan Baldock, *Warm Inside*, solo exhibition, Accelerator, Stockholm, Sweden (2021).

Copyright Jonathan Baldock. Courtesy the artist and Accelerator. Photo by Christian Saltas.



Jonathan Baldock, *Untitled*, 2019. Copyright Jonathan Baldock. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Mark Blower.



Installation view: *Strange Clay: Ceramics in Contemporary Art*, group exhibition, Hayward Gallery, London, England (2022). Copyright Jonathan Baldock. Courtesy the artist and Hayward Gallery, London. Photo by Mark Blower.



Jonathan Baldock at CAC Residency 2018. Photo by Damian Griffiths.



Jonathan Baldock, *Becoming Plant (A hop)*, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery. Photo © Mark Blower.

Notes for editors

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Download images at ysp.org.uk/press

Listings information

The Weston Gallery is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holidays

Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, Wakefield WF4 4LG

Near Wakefield and Barnsley – M1 Junction 38

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Open seven days a week, except Christmas Eve and Christmas Day

Book tickets at ysp.org.uk

Social media

Instagram and Twitter: @YSPsculpture

Facebook: @YorkshireSculpturePark

LinkedIn: Yorkshire Sculpture Park

#ArtWithoutWalls #YSPSculpture

About Jonathan Baldock

Jonathan Baldock was born in 1980 in Kent, UK. He lives and works in London. He works across multiple platforms including sculpture, installation and performance. He graduated from Winchester School of Art with a BA in Painting (2000-2003), followed by the Royal College of Art, London with an MA in Painting (2003-2005).

Baldock's work is saturated with humour and wit, as well as an uncanny, macabre quality that channels his longstanding interest in myth and folklore. He has an ongoing focus on the contrast between the material qualities of ceramic and fabric in his work. Concerned with removing the functional aspects of the materials he uses, Baldock instead works in a performative way through his sculptural assemblages, bringing the viewer, the object and the space they simultaneously occupy into question as a theatrical or ritualistic act.

Baldock's previous solo and two-person exhibitions include *Unearthed*, Kunstverein Göttingen, Germany, (2023); *we are flowers of one garden*, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, UK (2023); *I'm Still Learning*, La Casa Encendida, Madrid, Spain (2021); *Warm Inside*, Accelerator, Stockholm, Sweden (2021); *Me, Myself and I*, Kunsthall Stavanger, Norway (2020); *Facecrime (suspect)*, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Bluecoat, Liverpool, UK (touring); *Facecrime*, Tramway, Glasgow and Camden Arts Centre, London, UK (touring); *LOVE LIFE: Act 3*, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill, UK (2017); *LOVE LIFE: Act 2*, Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, UK (2017); *There's No Place Like Home*, Southwark Park Galleries, London, UK (2017); *LOVE LIFE: Act 1*, PEER, London, UK (2016); *The Soft Machine*, Chapter Gallery, Cardiff, Wales, UK (2016) and *A strange cross between a butcher's shop and a nightclub*, Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, UK (2013).

Baldock has recently participated in group shows including *WINK WINK* at The Whitaker Museum & Art Gallery, Rossendale, UK (2023); *Poor Things* at Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, UK (2023); *Strange Clay* at Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2022); *Threadbare* at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, UK (2021); *Human Conditions of Clay* at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, Wales (2021); and the inaugural Towner International biennial at Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne, UK (2020). His works are included in prominent collections including Aishti Foundation, Beirut, Lebanon; Arts Council Collection, London, England; The Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, England; The Roberts Institute of Art, London, England and Saatchi Gallery, London, England.

About Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) is the leading international centre for modern and contemporary sculpture. Welcoming 380,000 visitors in 2022, YSP is an independent charitable trust and registered museum situated in the 500-acre, 18th-century Bretton Hall estate in West Yorkshire.

Founded in 1977 by Sir Peter Murray CBE and since 2022 led by Clare Lilley, YSP is the largest sculpture park of its kind in Europe. It is the only place in Europe to see Barbara Hepworth's *The Family of Man* in its entirety, alongside a significant collection of sculpture, including bronzes by Henry Moore, important pieces by Phyllida Barlow, Roger Hiorns, Damien Hirst, Studio Morison, Hemali Bhuta and Ai Weiwei, and site-related works by Katrina Palmer, Andy Goldsworthy, Alfredo Jaar, David Nash, Sean Scully and James Turrell.

YSP mounts a year-round temporary exhibitions programme including some of the world's leading artists across six indoor galleries and the outdoors. Recent highlights include exhibitions by Fiona Banner, Anthony Caro, Tony Cragg, Robert Indiana, Amar Kanwar, KAWS, Joan Miró, Henry Moore, Annie Morris, Giuseppe Penone, Jaume Plensa, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Sean Scully, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Chiharu Shiota, David Smith, Joana Vasconcelos, and Bill Viola.

Across its 45-year history, YSP has worked with over 1,000 artists from more than 40 countries, on varied projects from short-term residencies to major surveys. YSP supports artists at vital stages in their careers and is rare in having the accommodation, workshops and expertise to enable open-ended and risk-taking practice, giving artists space, time and support to think and to develop new ideas.

Over this time, YSP has sought to ignite, nurture and sustain interest in and debate around contemporary art and sculpture, especially with those for whom art participation is not habitual or familiar. It enables open access to art, situations and ideas, and continues to re-evaluate and expand the approach to considering art's role and relevance in society. Supporting 40,000 people each year through YSP's learning programme, this innovative work develops ability, confidence and life aspiration in participants.

YSP's core work is made possible by investment from Arts Council England, Wakefield Council, the Liz and Terry Bramall Foundation and Sakurako and William Fisher through the Sakana Foundation. YSP was named Art Fund Museum of the Year in 2014 and awarded VisitEngland's gold accolade in 2021-22 for an outstanding visitor attraction.

Creative Case for Diversity

Yorkshire Sculpture Park was founded in 1977 to enable fairer cultural access and opportunity and we are committed to being part of the change towards a fairer world. We do not tolerate discrimination in any form and are proactive in our programme, policies and behaviours to address inequalities locally, nationally and internationally. We recognise that economic, social and cultural disadvantage is complex and intersectional and shape our activity accordingly. Diversity and equality are crucial to the arts because they release the true potential of our nation's artistic talent – from every background. At YSP, we support Arts Council England's mission – great art and culture for everyone. We share ACE's commitment to promote and embed diversity in our workforce and cultural programme.



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