

An essay by Jenni Lomax to accompany the exhibition
Duplex by Alexandre da Cunha
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Duplex

It's a curious word, duplex, derived from 16th century Latin and yet sounding like a modern, made-up brand name. The word's duplicity of meaning and connotations of property conversions and DIY, could be ascribed to all of the works that Alexandre da Cunha has brought together for his exhibition at Brighton CCA. It is also the title of one particular sculpture. *Duplex*, 2016, is made up of two found elements; a rectangle of used, off-white carpet and metal bow pulpits from a sailing boat. Fixed perpendicularly to the wall, the carpet becomes the ground for the linear forms of the boat rails, which protrude out into space in abstract, low-relief. Having been transported from the places that carpet and boat rails are usually found, the utilitarian objects gain a different status and become united in an alien setting.

Some works in *Duplex*, the exhibition, have travelled directly from where they were installed in the elegant rooms of Thomas Dane Gallery, Naples for da Cunha's recent exhibition there, titled *Arena*. Now in Brighton, they continue a conversation about place and dis-placement while absorbing new meaning from their changed surroundings.

On first thoughts, there is little that connects Naples with Brighton, other than the sea. However, thinking less about history and architecture and more about attitude, there are threads to pick up on. Both are places where difference is welcomed and strangeness celebrated. Where there are narrow passageways of intrigue and open arenas for spectacle and display. Each loaded with the casual and colourful imagery that catches da Cunha's eye and discoverable sources of the workaday objects and materials that he always works with.



Seen in Naples *Coconut Figure III, 2020*, had an air of sanctity – something that might be found in the dark entrance to a church. Installed by the entrance to the exhibition in Brighton, this assemblage of an old metal basin, water tap, light fittings and a fresh coconut, feels alarmingly domestic with its hazardous combination of plumbing and electrics.

Arena, 2020 is another work from Naples and again its demeanour shifts as it settles in the new location. In Italy, this large, hanging work, stitched together from black and white umbrella coverings, evoked imagery of Renaissance parades and pageantry. Now in this lively seaside city, the resonance shifts towards windbreaks, paragliders and the contemporary sports arena. Like with *Duplex*, there are hints of modernism in *Arena's* constructed pattern of monochrome triangles. A reminder, perhaps of da Cunha's native Brazil where the defunct umbrellas were found and where the work was made.

Fabric and textiles, more commonly found in the home or workplace, are amongst da Cunha's list of favoured materials. There is the carpet in *Duplex*, the umbrellas of *Arena*, the sun-bleached garden parasols of *Nero I and II, 2019*, a beach towel in *Amazons (Painting VIII) 2015* and a parachute in *Free Fall II, 2016*. Then there are the hundreds of dyed cotton mopheads that have been stitched and knotted together for *Kentucky (Napoli,) 2020*.

In contrast to the airy lightness of *Arena*, *Kentucky* is weighty, with heavy strands of the mopheads forming a luxuriously deep pile that appears in an alternating pattern on both sides. Sections of the cotton have been dyed in earthy sun-baked tones of terracotta, Naples yellow and woodland green, the rest remain their natural calico colour, giving it the quality of paint on canvas. Intended to wash floors, these humble items have been re-purposed to become a sumptuous textile, suspended from the ceiling above the kind of floor they might otherwise have been used to clean. Being elevated in this way by no means denigrates the intended use of the mops. Rather, their fundamental importance to society is emphasised by their pronounced visibility.

Basic building materials of urban living, such as concrete paving, industrial light fittings and sections of cement pipes, feature in da Cunha's hybrid assemblages; particularly in his large-scale outdoor sculptures. Worn out and discarded wheelbarrows, cement mixers and other tools of the building trade have also been requisitioned and re-purposed. In *Duplex*, occupying a large area

of the gallery's floor, five differently sized but similarly vessel shaped objects are displayed on a low platform of square pavement slabs. On first sight, this collection of 'urns' with their various patinas could be museum antiquities. A closer look reveals them to be cement or concrete mixer drums. Removed from the rest of the machine and reorientated on a concrete ready-made plinth, the down-to-earth drums become objects of beauty. Some have been stripped down to the metal and polished to an enticing shine. The surfaces of others have been worked on so that textured patterns emerge from their layers of usage and coloured paintwork. This double-take is not intentionally deceitful, rather da Cunha is pointing out useful things that are overlooked; his reconfiguring and considered placement transforms the unwanted mixer drums into objects to be looked upon and noticed. Although they are not ancient treasures from a museum as they initially appear, this revelation is uplifting.

Alexandre da Cunha is an arch manipulator of ready-made objects and mundane materials. The processes he uses to transform things are incisive and wily. Putting strange things together in incongruous relationships, opens up new dialogues and ways of seeing that debunks prejudice and social hierarchy. There is wonder in a cotton bed sheet over an inflatable rubber ring that becomes marble, mop-heads that become tapestries and the well-used tools and equipment of the building trade becoming historic treasures.

The works gathered together in Brighton find an affinity with each other; some in direct conversation, while others connect across and between the two rooms. *Duplex*, for example is confronted by the corporal and swashbuckling presence of *Coconut Figure I, 2020*, while *Arena* in the South Gallery nods to the light, ethereal presence of *Free Fall II*, hanging high from the ceiling in the North Gallery. The assembled objects take on this new situation; reflecting, deflecting and soaking up history, architecture, politics and locality. Da Cunha's, clever-often deviant- constructions are imbued with ambiguity and each of them defiantly owns an individual identity, unique to itself.

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