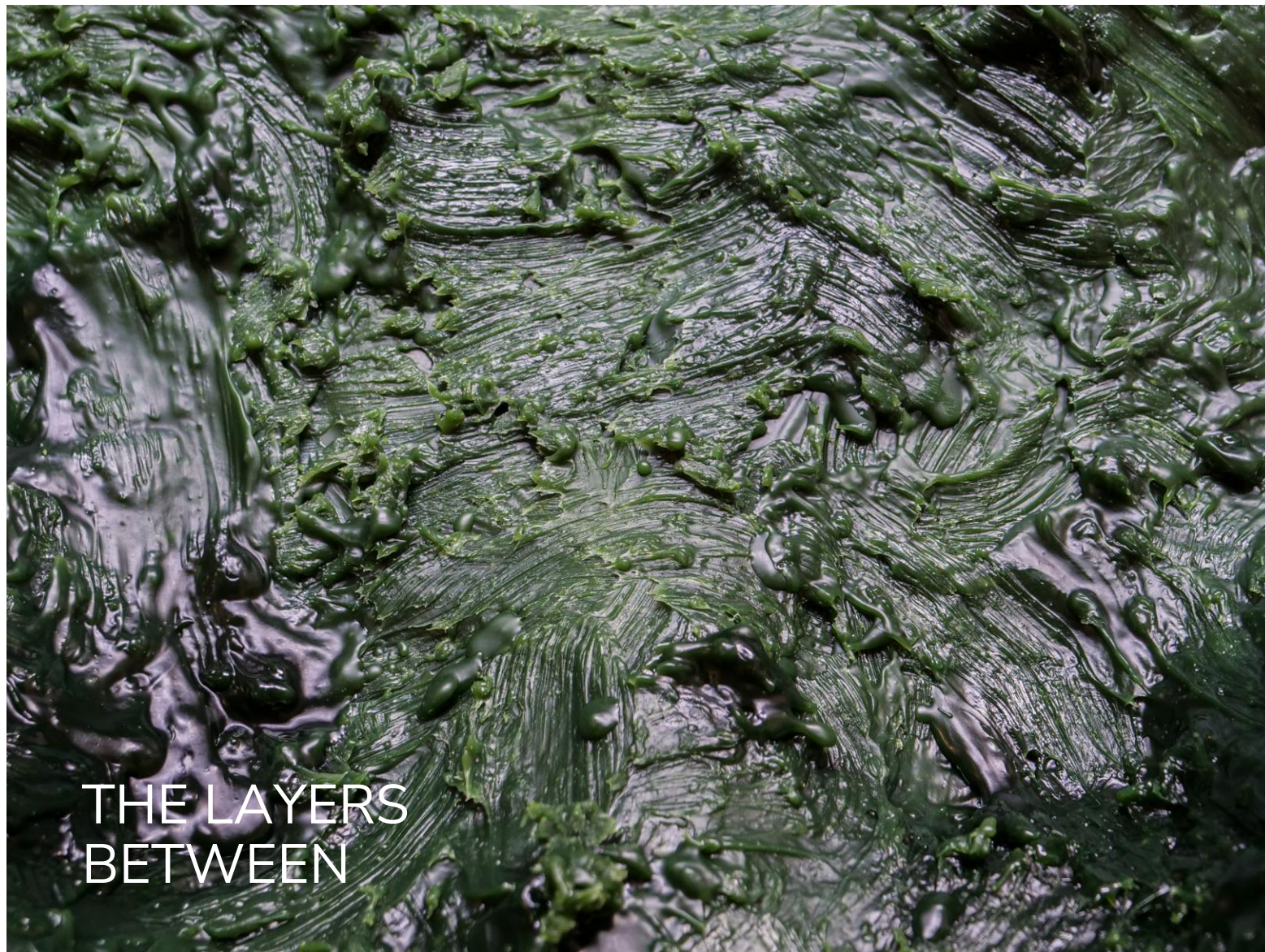




THE LAYERS BETWEEN

Fig. 1 **Callum McDonnell**, *Untitled*, 2026, Green casting wax, orange casting wax, carnauba wax, green jewellery wax.

CONTENTS

•	FIGURE LIST	iii
•	INTRODUCTION	
	Project Overview	01
	Research question	
•	01 — ENTERING THE PROCESS	
	Butter Knives	03
	Armature Stands / Working Boards	
	Scorched Plaster	
•	02 — ENTERING THE BODY	
	The Body Mould	06
	Wax Material Investigation	
•	03 — THE ORANGE BODY	
	Alpha Plaster / Wax Impressions	08
	Concealed Surface	
	To the Core	
•	04 — MATERIAL DIFFERENTIATION	
	Materially refined opulence	11
	Green Wax Formulation	
	Differentiation and Display as material enquiry	
•	06 — CONTEXTUAL ARTIFICE	
	Forced display	14
•	06 — PROCESS ARTEFACTS	
	Plaster Impressions	15
	Sprue Mould	
•	07 — REFLECTION	
	Scope / Narrowing of the Project	17
	Reproduction → Staying with Materials	
	Distributed Agency	
	Body / Bodily Inference	
	Finished Works / Material Investigation	
	Most Significant Shift in Practice	
	Research Headroom	
•	GLOSSARY	24
•	REFERENCE LIST	25
•	AI DECLARATION	26

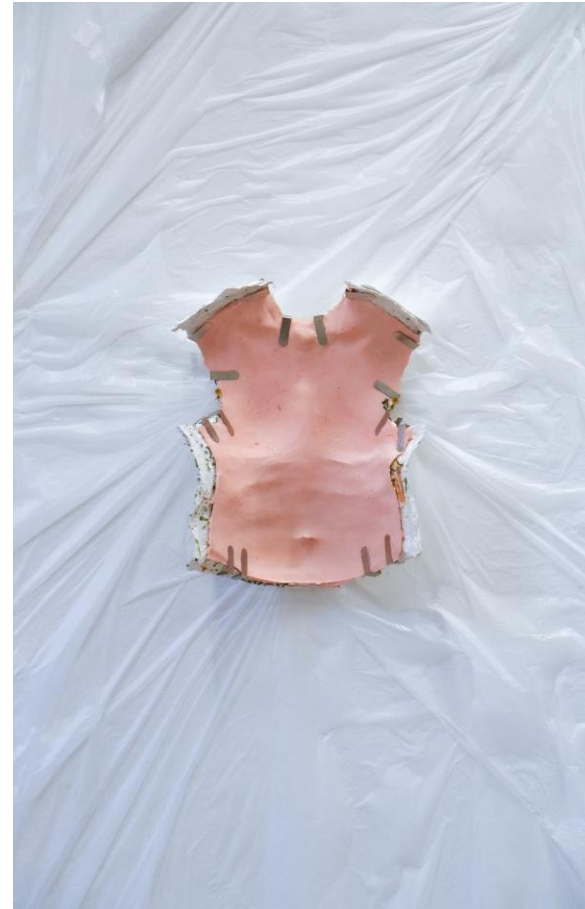


Fig. 2 Callum McDonnell, *Brother Mould I*, 2026, Silicone, plaster bandage, stainless steel clips.

FIGURE LIST

• Fig. 1 Callum McDonnell , <i>Untitled</i> , 2026, Green casting wax, orange casting wax, carnauba wax, green jewellery wax	i
• Fig. 2 Callum McDonnell , <i>Brother Mould I</i> , 2026, Silicon, plaster bandage, stainless steel clips	ii
• Fig. 3 Callum McDonnell , <i>CORE</i> , 2026, Orange casting wax, alpha plaster, cut nails, steel	01
• Fig. 4 Callum McDonnell , <i>Untitled</i> , 2026, Pastel	02
• Fig. 5 Callum McDonnell , <i>Chasers table</i> , 2026, Wax, butterknives, wax tools assorted	03
• Fig. 6 Lockbund Foundry butterknives wax tools	
• Fig. 7 In process close up of <i>Layer by Layer</i>	04
• Fig. 8 Callum McDonnell , <i>Layer by Layer</i> , 2026, Ply	
• Fig. 9 Close up of original cast	05
• Fig. 10 Close up of applied pastel	
• Fig. 11 Callum McDonnell , <i>Impressions i</i> , 2026, Burnt plaster, pastel, scrim	
• Fig. 12 Process photos of mould application and assembly	06
• Fig. 13 Callum McDonnell , <i>Brother Mould I</i> , 2026, Silicone, plaster bandage, stainless steel clips.	
• Fig. 14 Fifth mix of wax being remelted	07
• Fig. 15 First mix of wax being remelted	
• Fig. 16 <i>Test block of alpha plaster</i>	08
• Fig. 17 Callum McDonnell , <i>Alpha i</i> , 2026, Alpha plaster, rubber casting bowl.	
• Fig. 18 <i>Alpha plaster base to "Core"</i>	
• Fig. 19 First coat plaster core	
• Fig. 20 First coat plaster core	
• Fig. 21 Cut nails inserted into core base	09
• Fig. 22 Plaster base steel frame and sculpture display	
• Fig. 23 Mirrored material accretion	
• Fig. 24 Wax collecting sculpture base	10
• Fig. 25 Still from process video ironing off the wax from the cored wax cast	
• Fig. 26 Close up of wax patination left imprinted into plaster surface	
• Fig. 27 Close up of wax accretion on cored stomach and chest.	
• Fig. 28 First pour green wax transparency	11
• Fig. 29 Orange wax transparency	
• Fig. 30 Blue wax transparency i	
• Fig. 31 Blue wax transparency ii	
• Fig. 32 Blue wax transparency preliminary support structure	
• Fig. 33 Pre-polished green wax	12
• Fig. 34 Polished green wax	
• Fig. 35 Callum McDonnell , <i>SPRUE</i> , 2026, Green casting wax, orange casting wax, carnauba wax, green jewellery wax	13
• Fig. 36 Callum McDonnell , <i>CORE</i> , Orange casting wax, alpha plaster, cut nails, steel	
• Fig. 37 Callum McDonnell , <i>REFRACT</i> , Glass wax, Blue jewellery wax	
• Fig. 38 Display for wax working tools from the foundry	14
• Fig. 39 surgical table display for Alpha plaster impressions in clay	
• Fig. 40 Pallets intended for display purposes	
• Fig. 41 Callum McDonnell , <i>Impressions V</i> , Alpha Plater, Scrim	15
• Fig. 42 Close of Impressions V prior to intervention	
• Fig. 43 Impressions V prior to intervention	
• Fig. 44 Callum McDonnell , <i>Mould i</i> , 2026, Alpha plaster, scrim	16
• Fig. 45 internals of <i>Mould i</i>	
• Fig. 46 <i>Mould I</i> prior to scrim being trimmed.	
• Fig. 47 Clay layup of pipe to create negative for sprue production	
• Fig. 48 Blue and glass wax first pour on pink silicone mould	17
• Fig. 49 Close up of the layers from <i>Layer by Layer</i>	18
• Fig. 50 Interior paint up of orange cast	
• Fig. 51 Wall materiality	
• Fig. 52 Callum McDonnell , <i>CORE</i> , 2026, Orange casting wax, alpha plaster, cut nails, steel	19
• Fig. 53 Second exhibition space	20
• Fig. 54 Callum McDonnell , <i>Impressions iii</i> , 2026, Plaster, scrim	
• Fig. 55 Callum McDonnell , <i>Production of trace</i> , 2026, Installation, various	21
• Fig. 56 Close up of display	
• Fig. 57 Callum McDonnell , <i>Impressions ii</i> , 2026, Plaster	22
• Fig. 58 Close up of <i>impressions ii</i>	
• Fig. 59 Base view of <i>CORE</i>	23
• Fig. 60 Rear view of <i>SPRUE</i>	24

PROJECT OVERVIEW

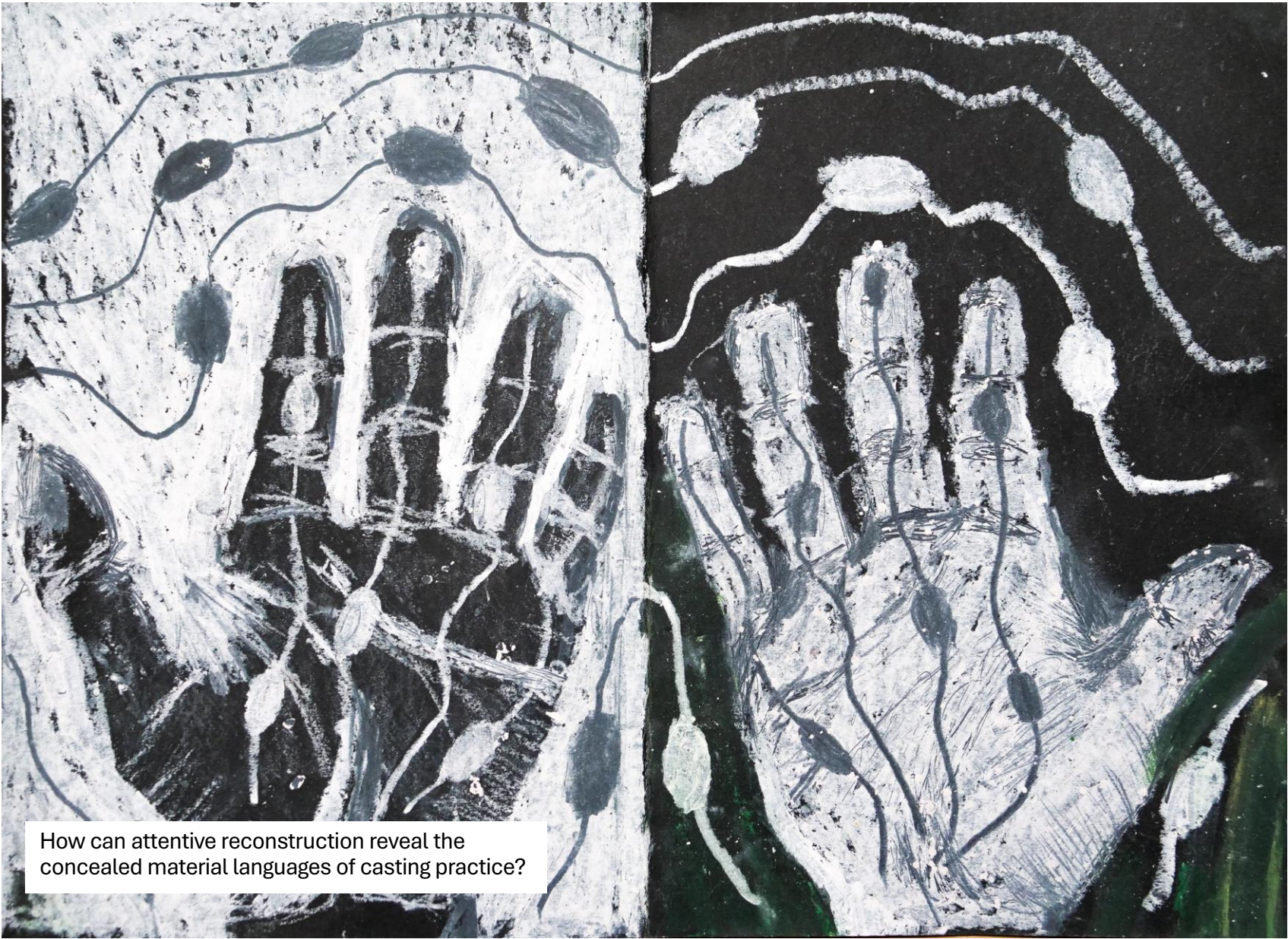
This work emerges from experience of observation and participation within the foundry environment, where I became increasingly attentive to the material processes that underpin casting. Casting is a self-erasing, stratified process: each stage conceals, entombs or destroys the material evidence of what came before. Concealed Strata shifts attention towards these temporary materials, traces and artefacts, treating them not as technical by-products, but as forms with their own material cultures, taxonomies and sensory languages.

Through attentive reconstruction, selected stages of production were replicated and isolated, slowing the process and allowing attention to shift from technical function towards material qualities. Replication became a means of staying within these concealed stages long enough for their material languages to develop beyond their function, whilst remaining informed by their functional aesthetics. Materials are not simply carriers of predetermined ideas; their properties and behaviours can redirect the enquiry.

The body does not function as the subject of the work, but as the perceptual vehicle through which these material processes become sensorially legible. Bodily forms, impressions and actions provided an entry point into the materials, but bodily inference emerged through sustained engagement rather than deliberate representation. Rather than reproducing foundry processes, *Concealed Strata* excavates their concealed material languages, making visible what casting habitually conceals.



Fig. 3 Callum McDonnell, *CORE*, 2026, Alpha plaster



How can attentive reconstruction reveal the concealed material languages of casting practice?

Fig. 4 Callum McDonnell, *Untitled*, 2026, Pastel.



Fig. 5 Callum McDonnell, *Chasers table*, 2026, Wax, butterknives, wax tools assorted.



Fig. 6 Lockbund Foundry butterknives wax tools.

Butter Knives

One of the things that had stayed with me from working with the foundry was their tools, particularly the butter knives used for wax work. I became interested in their oxidised surfaces and bent shapes, and how this oxide mirrored the qualities of patina in finished bronzes. I set out making my own, initially to use as tools, but also fascinated in the time/labour imbedded in these tarnished encrusted objects and that.

Many of the tools originate from domestic and clinical settings with their function bastardised, but their previous associations remain active. Removed again from the foundry and placed within an installation, they carry accumulated contexts with them. The layering of these contexts within objects of production, raised questions around the distinction between artefact and artwork.



Fig. 7 In process close up of *Layer by Layer*



Fig. 8 Callum McDonnell, *Layer by Layer*, 2026, Ply

Armature Stands / Working Boards

Noticing the damaged layers in work tops armature stands and casting boards I used ply and began eroding and slumping its surface to mimic the qualities of casting materials used on these surfaces. I initially questioned whether the piece needed to become something larger, but the material enquiry itself was enough. It felt like it had pseudo workshop purpose.



Fig. 9 Close up of original cast



Fig. 10 Close up of applied pastel

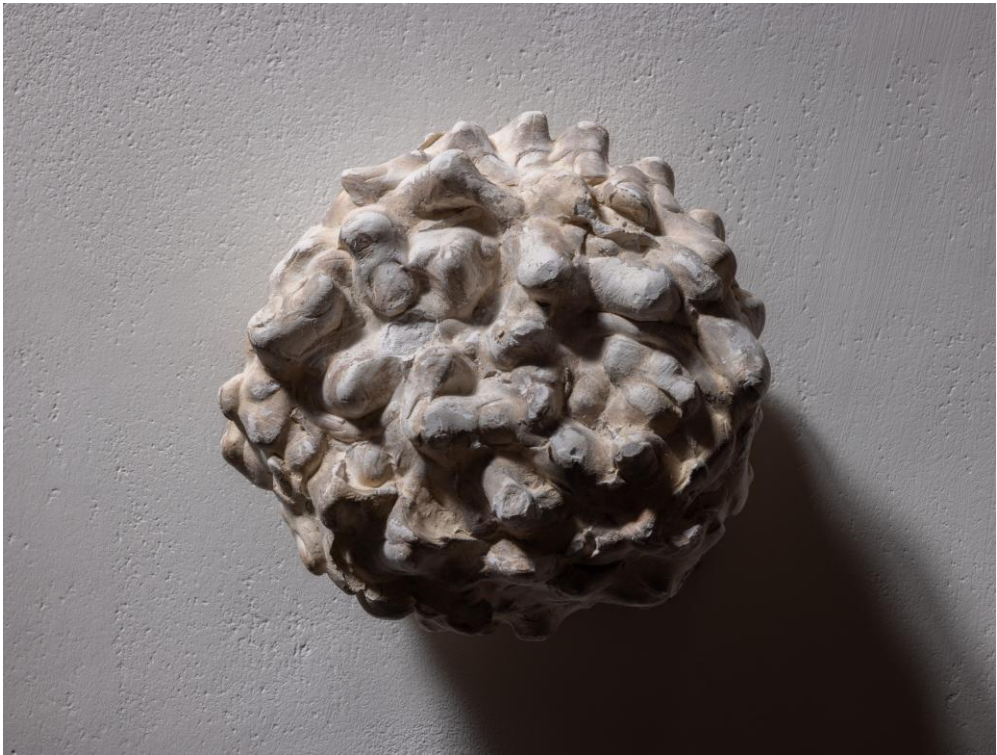


Fig. 11 **Callum McDonnell**, *Impressions i*, 2026, Burnt plaster, pastel, scrim

Scorched Plaster

Interested in the positive impressions left in moulds of hand made clay sculptures I wanted to replicated the overlapping erasure of the human form in the making process. I wanted to highlight the skin detail, I started using pastel to pick up some of that detail. However, it began to read too literally, too charged and "bloody", I burnt off the pastel. This caused the plaster to degrade, leaving patches of solid white and scorched areas. I thought this a failure at first, but the more I observed it, the more its patched and obscured surface said about process, and the processes plaster undergoes within lost-wax casting. It ended up becoming one of my strongest pieces. The material had redirected the intention of the work rather than simply receiving it.

This resonates with Jane Bennett's discussion of material agency in *Vibrant Matter*, in which material forces are understood as participating in events rather than existing solely as passive matter acted upon by humans. (Bennett, 2010).



Fig. 12 Process photos of mould application and assembly



Fig. 13 Callum McDonnell, *Brother Mould I*, 2026, Silicone, plaster bandage, stainless steel clips

Body mould

Attempting to replicate a wax horse torso from the foundry, I enlisted a fellow student and technician to help cast my own torso. I deliberately adopted a slumped posture, cautious to distance myself from any sense of classical idealism or an egotistical, patriarchal monumentality.

On the first attempt the shell was too thin, using old plaster bandaging which made it buckle; the second attempt produced a strong, reusable two-part mould. I experimented with different ways of securing the silicone, eventually using paper fasteners that applied pressure without damaging the detail of the silicon interior while the glue set. The fasteners themselves became unexpectedly aesthetically interesting, an almost Frankensteinian carapace. What initially was poor mould making practice with improper keys and makeshift shell became the basis to open up interesting material dialogues.



Fig. 14 Fifth mix of wax being remelted.



Fig. 15 First mix of wax being remelted.

First wax

I noticed that the casting wax I had purchased was wildly different from the wax I had worked with at the foundry, both aesthetically and physically. It was significantly softer and lacked the longevity I required. The casting technician kindly let me experiment with the foundry wax they had used previously, which had a rosinous quality that hardened the green wax and altered its colour. I also used blue and green machining waxes from home. First lay-up was difficult, the mould hadn't been separated completely and had flaws and cracked seam lines from improper paint up, too thin for longevity. I melted it down and began experimenting with further mixtures. Gradually, achieving the right qualities became increasingly meticulous; each time, I melted my own body back down in pursuit of the qualities I was looking for. The process became less about following a fixed recipe than learning what the material could do through repeated handling.

Richard Sennett's discussion of craftsmanship in *The Craftsman*, particularly his emphasis on developing knowledge through sustained engagement with materials, tools and repeated practice rather than simply following prescribed procedures. (Sennett, 2008)

Alpha plaster and wax impressions.

Continuing to replicating registration marks from mould making and the hand impressions I began seeing the limitations of standard plaster with delicate pieces failing leading me to alpha plasters.

Leftover material that would be bashed out or removed from rubber mixing bowls and discarded suddenly had a heightened material lustre, a purer white aesthetic and smooth, polished surface. The negative shape and the tool used to make it became the inspiration for the plaster presented on top of the casting bowl it was cast from. As simple as it was, the piece brought my attention back to the fundamental artefacts of the process.

During my tests with alpha plaster, I realised that regular plaster is more porous and absorbs wax, whilst alpha plaster allows the wax to sit on its surface, pooling and running rather than seeping into it. That small test became important when I began coring the body cast. I realised that the surface of the wax would be transferred into the plaster core, creating a texture that would normally be destroyed and never seen within the casting process. The test piece had unintentionally given me a way of thinking about this relationship: one material could have its surface stripped away whilst another accumulated it. This felt like a payoff from sustained material investigation. I wanted to make that surface visible by melting it away, both simulating the “burn out” of lost wax and revealing a new texture.

The discovery reinforced a materialist approach in which the properties and behaviours of matter are not secondary to the idea, but part of how the idea is generated.



Fig. 16 Test block of alpha plaster



Fig. 17 Callum McDonnell, *Alpha i*, 2026, Alpha plaster, rubber casting bowl



Fig. 18 Alpha plaster base to “Core”



Fig. 19 First coat plaster core



Fig. 20 First coat plaster core

Nails

Part of the process requires waxes to be cored with plaster, these have nails embedded in them as feet. As I built the layers of plaster into the cast, I added rows of these nails, far more than was functionally necessary. It began to look like rows of teeth. When it came to display, I became torn. On one hand, I loved visually utilising the function of the nails as feet, allowing it to stand upright; on the other, laying it on its back revealed the inner cavern of the cast and the feet where they had reacted with the wet plaster, creating rusted blotches of nail and plaster.

I wanted the piece to sit on an industrial metalworking stand, with the melted wax collected beneath it. A small square of alpha plaster used to experiment with inspired the base, mirroring the material composition of the sculpture above, the display became almost indistinct from the sculpture.



Fig. 21 Cut nails inserted into core base



Fig. 23 Mirrored material accretion



Fig. 22 Plaster base steel frame and sculpture display



Fig. 24 Wax collecting sculpture base



Fig. 25 Still from process video ironing off the wax from the cored wax cast



Fig. 27 Close up of wax accretion on cored stomach and chest.



Fig. 26 Close up of wax patination left imprinted into plaster surface

To the Core

Along side butter knives dental tools hacksaw blades etc irons are used to flatten and manipulate wax. I found it eerily satisfying as tool to erode the wax from the cast. As the skin detail sloughed away, the pitted plaster beneath was revealed. The paint marks began to resemble striations or muscle tissue. Without deliberately engineering bodily inference, I found myself reading my own skin into the material. The running wax felt almost soothing, whilst the iron grated against the hard plaster, creating a jarring contrast between slick material and abrasive resistance. The returning realisation was that I was doing this to my own form. Every time I handled, moved, polished or damaged casts, it felt like a form of self-infliction. This extends my earlier research into somatosensory empathy, where I explored how material cues can prompt vicarious bodily sensation through visual and sensory inference (McDonnell, 2026).

Initially, I was obsessive about removing all the wax, fascinated by the surface beneath. Gradually, the remaining accretions created a striking, almost stalactite-like contrast, with wax transported from the upper to lower half. The drips recorded the process orientation, while the changing weight and coverage across the belly and chest gave the piece a new material presence. After melting, it became clear that it needed to remain on its back.



Fig. 28 First pour green wax transparency



Fig. 29 Orange wax transparency



Fig. 30 Blue wax transparency i

Materially refined opulence

During the orange and green paint ups, I noticed that the thinner wax had a natural transparency and that the paint-up produced beautiful shadows of the internal drip textures. However, I needed these sculpture to hold more substantial process features, but the observation stayed with me and became the starting point for a separate investigation into transparency.

Noticing the gorgeous hue from the blue machining wax I decided to add glass wax to thin the pigments and increase its transparency further pushing the material towards a stained-glass appearance. After several attempts, including further failures caused by cracking and fragility, I managed to produce the full body cast. What struck me most about the blue piece was its opulence. It became almost an antithesis to the other pieces, elevated from but as a result of functional process.



Fig. 31 Blue wax transparency ii



Fig. 32 Blue wax transparency preliminary support structure



Fig. 33 Pre-polished green wax



Fig. 34 Polished green wax

Green Wax Formulation

Returning to the green cast, I gradually approached the material properties I was looking for. The wax needed to be hard enough to polish but flexible enough to resist cracking. My final mixture combined green casting wax, brown rosin casting wax, carnauba wax, blue and green machining wax and glass wax. Each altered the wax in an almost alchemical way, affecting hardness, melting point and plasticity. As the wax became harder, I could polish it more effectively. Using white spirit to mildly dissolve the surface, followed by soapy water and gum paper, I achieved a near-mirror finish that echoed the isopropanol sheen of the wax before investment.

Differentiation and Display as material enquiry

I had originally intended to imbue one green cast with all the distinguishing process aesthetics I had observed, as the work developed each feature became its own line of investigation and as such their material languages diverged. The green became concerned with spruing, screwing and polished form—almost brutalist—and began to resemble a cuirass. The orange focused on change, weight, degradation and trace, while the blue suggested refinement, distillation and fragility.

This was echoed in their respective displays, and support systems whilst all connected by workshop practices at different stages. Green supported by foam cushioning to preserve detail work, orange supported by a temperature resistant frame, whilst blue was developed to a minimal reflective mirror support system that accentuated the material qualities and created a cubic cavity and light-filled void beneath the sculpture as a result of solving a safety problem. Looking through the arm and neck openings, the interior felt almost glacial.



Fig. 35 Callum McDonnell, *SPRUE*, 2026, Green casting wax, orange casting wax, carnauba wax, green jewellery wax



Fig. 36 Callum McDonnell, *CORE*, Orange casting wax, alpha plaster, cut nails, steel



Fig. 37 Callum McDonnell, *REFRACT*, Glass wax, Blue jewellery wax



Fig. 38 Ironing board display for wax working tools from the foundry



Fig. 39 surgical table display for Alpha plaster impressions in clay

Forced display

At this stage I was developing multiple body casts, plaster pieces and a display of modified butter knives and tools. I was still interested in the crossover between clinical, domestic and workshop environments, looking towards surgical tables, ironing boards, dust sheeting and pallets. However, these references became too overt and constructed. I realised that the work already carried these associations without needing to build them around it.



Fig. 40 Pallets intended for display purposes

Larger plaster impressions

I later made two more larger casts in alpha plaster interested in what self-erasure might look like at scale.

Flat finger-impression cast combed registration marks with layered, self-erasing impressions. It came out almost like a tablet. I wasn't resolved by it, so I hammered the piece, fracturing the plaster and creating cracks and chips across its surface. What had initially read as a finished attempt at a cast suddenly opened up a conversation between the cast form and the material itself. This brought me back to the scorched plaster I had made earlier: where is the point at which the form begins to concede to the material itself and enters into dialogue with it. The fingers now read almost archaeologically, or architecturally.

In another palm cast the plaster needed to be “cheesy” enough to contain the form without building walls. Smoothing the surface left gestural trails from my fingers. The scrim within the plaster reinforced these marks. Again, I felt the form was too rigid and uneven, so I began intervening in it, driving screws through points to crack the plaster. This made me wonder what a flexible plaster cast might look like, or what might happen if scrim became part of its materiality rather than remaining a concealed support.



Fig. 42 Close of Impressions V prior to intervention



Fig. 41 Callum McDonnell, *Impressions V*, Alpha Plaster, Scrim



Fig. 43 Impressions V prior to intervention



Fig. 44 Callum McDonnell, *Mould i*, 2026, Alpha plaster, scrim



Fig. 45 internals of *Mould i*



Fig. 46 *Mould i* prior to scrim being trimmed.



Fig. 47 Clay layup of pipe to create negative for sprue production

Sprues

I needed a mould to create the sprues for the green wax body, providing an opportunity to replicate the locating marks used in mould making. I had intended to display the interior, but, as with the palm cast, the smoothing and hand impressions began to supersede the functional marks within the mould. The interaction with the plaster and exaggeration of trails used to smooth and cover the sections were deeply satisfying, dragging my fingers through the plaster. Traces of scrim remained around the edges, including the offcuts on which the mould now sits in the exhibition.

Scope / narrowing of the project

At the beginning of the project, I wanted to cover each area of the foundry, from mould making and wax work through to investment, fettling and patination. As the project progressed, it became increasingly evident that the avenues for development were vast. My focus instead settled on the earlier stages of bodily impressions and temporary material stages, which held significance precisely because they are normally concealed, transformed or destroyed. I can't help but see the irony of such rich, transitory material enquiry against the permanence of the bronze it facilitates.

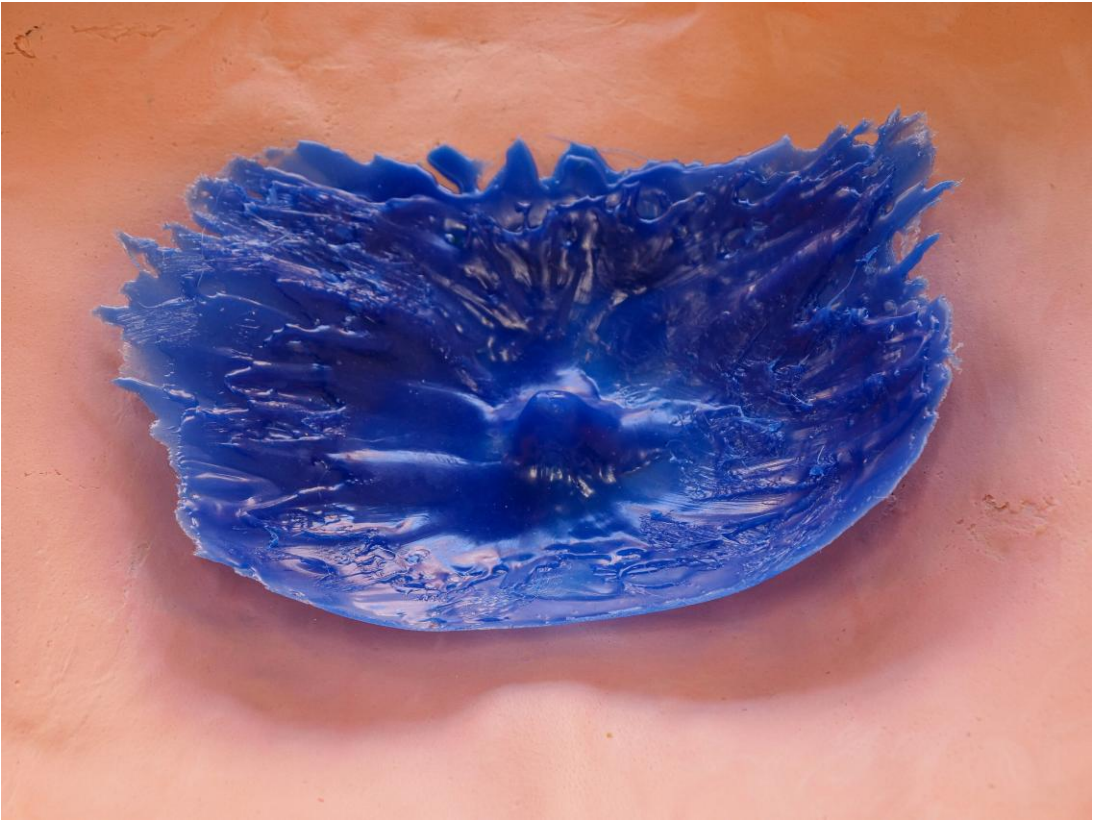


Fig. 48 Blue and glass wax first pour on pink silicone mould.



Fig. 49 Close up of the layers from *Layer by Layer*



Fig. 50 Interior paint up of orange cast

Reproduction: Staying with materials

Looking back across the project, what began as an attempt to reproduce the aesthetics of foundry production became less concerned with reproduction and more concerned with what could be discovered by staying with the materials. Each reconstruction created an opportunity to slow a process down and pay attention to qualities that would normally disappear into production: the surface of a plaster core, the accumulation of wax, the marks left by hands and tools, or the residue of a material that would usually be discarded. In many cases, the most interesting developments came when I stopped trying to resolve the work according to its original function and allowed the material to determine where the investigation went next. A pattern became apparent retrospectively through the accumulation of the work.

I notice something.

I try to reproduce or investigate it.

The material behaves differently than expected.

Something unexpected becomes interesting.

I follow that rather than forcing the original intention.

Attentive reconstruction was the starting point; becoming receptive to the material became the practice. This became a form of material learning: the more closely I attended to what the material was doing, the less I needed to determine its outcome in advance. Attentive reconstruction had therefore become less a method of reproducing process than a means of learning through material engagement and responding to its agency. This even happened with the walls in the space, sanding, planing and scraping revealed strata in the paint, making the gallery itself participate materially rather than remaining neutral.

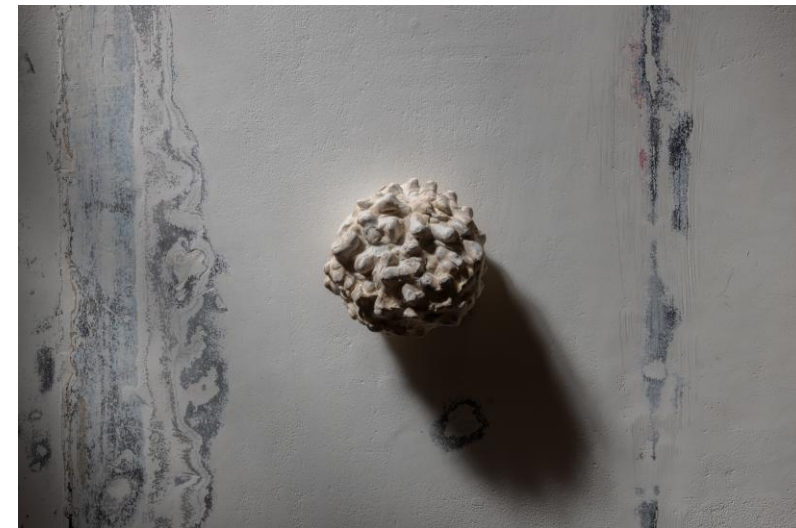


Fig. 51 Wall materiality



Fig. 52 Callum McDonnell, *CORE*, 2026, Orange casting wax, alpha plaster, cut nails, steel

Body / bodily inference

This also changed how I understood my involvement in producing bodily inference within the work. I had deliberately chosen the body as an entry point for processing and handling the materials: fingers pushing into clay, and later my torso as a means of entering the process I was trying to understand. From there, I stopped trying to engineer bodily inference into the work. As the materials became increasingly refined and differentiated through repeated reconstruction, bodily associations began to emerge without being deliberately produced. The pitted plaster revealed through melting wax recalled skin; nails embedded within the core became teeth; impressions became records of touch. Handling, damaging and altering my own casts created a more immediate physical relationship with the work. The less I forced the inference, the more convincingly it appeared. The body therefore was never a subject to represent, but a way of perceiving and responding to the material processes. Where my earlier research treated somatosensory empathy primarily as a framework for analysis, this project encountered it as an emergent property of material engagement (McDonnell, 2026).



Fig. 53 Second exhibition space

Finished works / material investigation

An early cast had broken fingers intended to be fixed, however the numbering in black marker, bleeding into the plaster, had more to say about process and materiality than the completed object.

The pursuit of creating finished works became counterproductive. I became more comfortable following material discoveries without needing to make them more complicated; the material investigation was already the work. Likewise, I didn't need to explicitly tie every work to its functional origin. Some objects retained the character of workshop artefacts, whilst others developed enough material and aesthetic identity to move beyond production. This distinction became increasingly important within the exhibition. it shifted how I understood craft within the project: not as a supporting technical process, but as a form of artistic enquiry in its own right.



Fig. 54 Callum McDonnell, *Impressions iii*, 2026, Plaster, scrim



Fig. 55 Callum McDonnell, *Production of trace*, 2026, Installation, various

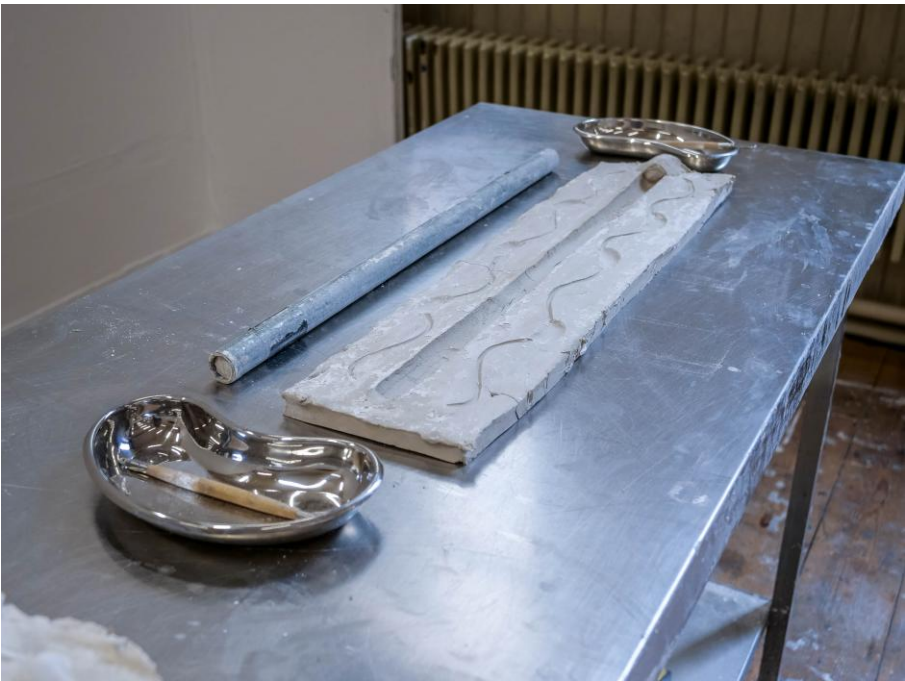


Fig. 56 Close up of display

Distributed Agency

I had previously discussed distributed authorship within the foundry and art production more broadly, particularly between client and technician where aspects of production are delegated. I had also touched upon material agency, but what I had not been able to articulate was how material agency arises and becomes articulated through sustained material attention. This began to differentiate the maker, between the conceptual enactment of an individual's idea and acting as a conduit within a dialogue with material process and inquiry. In the same way that Bennett positions materials as possessing agency, the operator or interactor becomes an interpreter of that agency, responding to what the material reveals through its resistance, transformation and behaviour.

The tools, moulds, surfaces and residues could remain as traces of activity, whilst the body casts developed their own identities through the material investigations that produced them. The work therefore began to naturally split into two distinct displays with some of the works that were in dialogue with the original space referencing some of the foundry and workshop settings.



Fig. 58 Close up of *impressions ii*



Fig. 57 Callum McDonnell, *Impressions ii*, 2026, Plaster

Most significant shift in practice

I began with a tendency to look towards larger constructions and more complete reproductions of the processes I encountered, but the work repeatedly showed me that its most interesting qualities often appeared in the unresolved, temporary or incidental stages. I became more comfortable allowing those moments to remain as they were, rather than needing them to become something more complete. Replication became a way of seeing, not an end in itself. Slowing the process made me more receptive to where the material investigation could lead, rather than where I expected it to go. I found that the temporary qualities of casting could become the very things worth looking at, while bodily inference could emerge through the same sustained engagement. The resulting works are therefore not simply representations of casting processes, but material manifestations of sustained attention and material receptivity.



Fig. 59 Base view of *CORE*

Research headroom

This same practice could extend beyond casting into any workshop environment, e.g. textiles, 3D printing etc. I have realised I was already working this way in a separate project, *Double Life Post*: rather than beginning with a concise idea for the project, it was the materiality of the post that pulled me in. I responded to it, learnt its history. I now perceive process as a linguistic placeholder for material dialogue.

GLOSSARY

Alpha plaster

A higher-strength plaster with a denser, smoother surface than conventional plaster. Within this project, its reduced porosity allowed wax to sit and accumulate on the surface rather than being readily absorbed.

Attentive reconstruction

The deliberate replication and isolation of selected stages, materials or conditions within casting production in order to slow the process and attend to qualities normally subordinated to technical function.

Core / Coring

A material structure placed within a mould or cast to create or preserve an internal cavity or form; coring refers to the process of constructing or introducing this internal structure.

Craft

A mode of making in which material knowledge, skill, tools and physical engagement contribute to the development of the work.

Distributed authorship

An understanding of production in which authorship is complicated by the participation of artists, technicians, tools, materials and processes rather than belonging exclusively to a singular artistic gesture.

Material agency

The capacity of material properties, behaviours and transformations to participate in and redirect the development of a work rather than simply receive a predetermined intention.

Material language / material languages

The physical and aesthetic characteristics through which a material communicates its history, process, function and transformation.

Material receptivity

A state of becoming increasingly receptive to what materials reveal through sustained engagement, allowing their behaviour to redirect the development of the work.

Practice-led material enquiry

A research approach in which knowledge is generated and tested through making and sustained engagement with materials and processes.

Process artefact

An object, residue, trace, tool or temporary material produced through making which would ordinarily remain subordinate to the production of a finished work.

Registration marks

Locating marks used during mould making to ensure that sections of a mould align correctly when assembled.

Somatic empathy / Somatosensory empathy

A form of vicarious bodily sensation in which material, visual or implied physical cues can prompt internal bodily inference or simulation.

Sprue

A channel or network attached to a wax model to provide pathways for molten metal to enter and allow gases to escape during casting.

Taxonomy

A system of classification. Within this project, the term refers to the shifting categories and associations through which materials and objects move between domestic, clinical, industrial, organic and bodily contexts.



Fig. 60 Rear view of *SPRUE*

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Senoner, Andreas