

**Penny Woolcock**  
*Dreaming Spires*  
2018 video



The video *The Same Road is a Different Road*, 2018, is a looping psychogeographical mapping of the London street where Woolcock lives. Like many urban streets, this one wends its way through neighbouring pockets of privilege and deprivation. To make the video, shot as a handheld point-of-view sequence travelling the length of the street, Woolcock collaborated with a young man who also lives there, a member of a local gang, who remained anonymous for fear of retaliation from his rivals. As they take turns delivering their individual narratives, their voices occasionally overlap for the refrain 'when the same road is a different road'. He explains how the city is carved up between gangs, and outlines the dangers he faces, describing the death of a fellow gang member, a 16-year-old boy stabbed while he was cycling in the area. She relates a stream-of-consciousness narrative that touches on remembered school lessons, dogs and food, and wonders why the local adventure playground is always closed. As they walk, her mind wanders freely, while his plots survival strategies. Given the socially engaged aspect of Woolcock's work over several decades, it is difficult to believe that these really are the insouciant thoughts going through her head as she is making this film. Can she really be thinking of feta and olives for breakfast or is this Socratic irony at work, intended to rouse the viewer to a more politicised position? It is hard to tell because they really are trifling thoughts. Woolcock and her collaborator's video portrays two radically different cosmologies, showing how life can be lived on a perpetual war footing – the young narrator claims the status of 'soldier' – or in a mode of privilege and moderate social awareness. And although the video is the product of their shared process, they never address one another directly and their stories remain distinct.

The polarisation of social classes is also the subject of *Dreaming Spires I & II*, 2018, a looped video in two parts that mirrors Oxford's 'town and gown' split between the city's non-academic community and the university. In one half, local MCs Black Jack and Side walk through the city as they rap with verve about the rougher aspects of Oxford life: homelessness, growing up on council estates and experiencing the condescension of university elites. In the other half, the camera tracks in slow motion a trio of students in academic dress as they walk through fabled colleges, their mouths curled with self-conscious

smiles, while a medley of voices recite excerpts from books associated with Oxford, including *Alice In Wonderland* and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

In both videos, Woolcock provides roughly equal screen time to individuals representing groups at opposite ends of the scale of social and economic privilege. But, as is evident from the recognisable excerpts read out over *Dreaming Spires II*, the stories of the privileged and the elite are already woven into the fabric of our culture, whereas those of people who suffer systemic imbalances, including lower income groups, ethnic minorities and immigrants, are not – yet. Woolcock's work brings disparate groups together on the same platform, but stops short of having them speak to one another directly. Sharing stories is one of the foundational activities of community. By bringing together the individual experiences of different groups, Woolcock's videos at least open up the possibility of greater understanding and, from there, perhaps even of dialogue. ■

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## Josephine Pryde: In Case My Mind is Changing

Simon Lee London

30 November to 12 January

Consistently interested in photography's integration into everyday life, and more recently in technology's influence on social habits and cognitive functions, Josephine Pryde's wordy exhibition titles have often emphasised associated rifts between intention, attention and actions. 'In Case My Mind is Changing' follows from previous titles such as 'These Are Just the Things I Say, They Are Not My Opinions' (2014, Arnolfini, Bristol) and the syntactically idiosyncratic 'lapses in Thinking By the person i Am' (2015, CCA, San Francisco), but the current exhibition, with its constituent images and sculptural elements, is less concerned with picturing devices and their users than with capturing prehistoric versions of messaging technologies.

Photographed in Northumberland and Spain, 12 images of Neolithic stone carvings are displayed as six large-scale diptychs. If this sounds like an academic affair, that's certainly how it first appears. Each diptych unites images of varying aspect ratios with regular variations in dimensions, colour intensity, scale, aspect and focus. In *Cup and Ring 1* (all 2018), the first image to confront the viewer at the gallery door, the diptych is split between a close-up shot of a dark stone with two cellular forms elevated on its surface, as if carved in relief. Over these cell forms have grown small white discs of lichen, constellation-like in appearance. With Pryde's sharp focus, the overlapping circles create an interesting, rhythmic abstraction across the photograph. The print on the right is the image of a forest floor covered in ground frost, the clearing lit by a shaft of deep red winter light. It's the only countryside view, a brief glimpse at Pryde's forest path. It is more pixelated than its paired photograph and, although all have been taken by Pryde, this graininess suggests it is a press clipping or archive shot blown large.

All remaining diptychs are paired surface studies of prehistoric cup-and-ring carvings where a central cavity is surrounded by concentric rings chased into the surface of a stone slab. Found in archaeological sites from early Europe to Australia, there has been much speculation about their orientation, aspect, rotation and signification. Many theories, including those of French prehistorian Jean Clottes, have posited these 'cupules' as symbols of female sustenance and fertility. And this hypothesis might resonate with Pryde's previous subjects, differently marked or indexed by new technologies, from pregnant teens and MRI-scanned fetuses to guinea pigs and smart tablet users. In 2011, Pryde's doubly exposed images of fetuses superimposed over a desert landscape in *It's Not My Body* were works that, in the artist's words, 'refer to pregnancy as a shared material state, rather than exclusively foregrounding an individual subject's experience of it'. And there is something fantastical about the shared material state of these numerous slabs, and in the question of how consistently these homogenous symbols once appeared around the world – this possible symbol of femininity embedded within shared imaginary or primordial memory. Avoiding the sensationalist subject matter of previous series, the stone carving images bring depth and historic range to Pryde's investigations of multiple and often

overlapping modes of reproduction – social, biological, technological, photographic, sculptural – and they highlight her talent at holding these themes aloft within incredibly spartan images.

In *Cup and Ring 6*, fresh snow dusts the carving's undulations shown up by crisp morning light, whereas, in its adjacent image, the carving is shot from an oblique angle and its surface light seems more artificial and diffuse, like the product of commercial or studio photography. Given the heft of these megaliths, this implication seems almost comically implausible. And all these technical juxtapositions, her nuancing of light, focus and cropping, reward close viewing, while the subjects' differences are accentuated by the digital diptych format frequently used on social media in the pursuit or suggestion of compelling biographies.

On the floor sit four minor sculptures, white nylon 3D prints on black polyurethane yoga mats. They look innocent but a bit odd, offsetting the seriousness of the photographs without totally undermining them. In the brief press release (penned presumably by Pryde) there is cursory mention of a tampon, and the sculptures are titled *Time and the Tampon 1-4*. These sculptures meet somewhere between blown-up versions of the compacted cotton that regularly plug reproductive cavities, and scaled-down, smoothed-over replicas of rock extractions, perhaps referencing those weathered surfaces that have for millennia recalled the power of the yonic. That power source seems to be the nub of this exhibition. Pryde's appraisals of these interconnected symbols amplify questions of how and for whom they were generated, and how the technology of stone carving might stimulate a certain kind of reverence in those who see them. Yet they are also less theoretical and more mystical than that; they are touch points, strange anachronistic offerings from Pryde's lens to the flint of the ancient stone carver. ■

**Isobel Harbison** is an art critic and lecturer in the department of Art, Goldsmiths; her book *Performing Image* will be published by MIT Press this spring.



**Josephine Pryde**  
installation view