



# q/a

# Made Worlds:

## A Conversation with Olivia Bax

by Elizabeth Fullerton

**London-based Olivia Bax** makes brightly colored sculptures whose tactile, handmade aesthetic derives from the pulp and papier-mâché that she uses to cover steel, chicken wire, and foam armatures. Though her objects echo elements of the observable world, they create their own universe and logic; likewise they may allude to function, with handles, funnels, and receptacles, but any usefulness is (mostly) illusory. “Off Grid,” Bax’s recent Mark Tanner Sculpture Award exhibition, which debuted at London’s Standpoint Gallery, before traveling to Cross Lane Projects in northern England and Tremenhoe Sculpture Gardens, featured a sprawling, mountainous landscape of protuberances and caves propped up by yellow stands (*Kingpin*); a hanging green contraption resembling a Victorian lady’s underskirt crossed with a baby swing (*Portal*);

and, unexpectedly, two fabricated yellow *Rollers* that doubled as chunky benches.

In *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Ursula K. Le Guin writes in praise of the humble container—or novel—that holds things and words. She describes her carrier bag as “full of wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed and intricately woven nets...full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations.” Bax’s sculptures are just such non-heroic, yet compelling containers of meaning.

**Elizabeth Fullerton:** [How has the experience of lockdown affected your practice?](#)

**Olivia Bax:** At the beginning, the delays were a relief. I didn’t feel I’d pushed *Kingpin* as far as it could go. Lockdown meant I could take it further. Then it

*Off White,*  
2020.  
Steel, plastic funnel,  
chicken wire,  
paper, UV-resistant  
PVA, plaster,  
paint, and wheels,  
145 x 170 x 90 cm.







THIS PAGE:

***Mothership,***  
**2019.**

Steel, chicken wire,  
paper, UV-resistant PVA,  
paint, and plaster,  
273 x 250 x 180 cm.

OPPOSITE:

***Juicer,***  
**2020.**

Steel, wood, polystyrene,  
chicken wire, funnels,  
handle, paper,  
paint, UV-resistant  
PVA, and plaster,  
175 x 127 x 120 cm.

became frustrating because I had shows out in the world that were not open. But it has definitely reaffirmed the fact that sculpture needs to be seen in reality; the online experience doesn't do the work justice.

**EF: Did winning the 2019/20 Mark Tanner Sculpture Award, with its £8,000 prize, affect your work?**

**OB:** Knowing that the studio and material costs were covered liberated me to make something at a larger scale. I felt I could push right to the edges of the walls and up to the ceiling and really test the dimensions of the gallery space. I've always been against the idea of fabrication because it removes the hand of the maker, but the award allowed me to think about how I could play with fabricated components as props for the made work. I'm thinking more now about staging exhibitions and how the work sits among other things that might not be made, which has been an exciting development.

**EF: How did you approach the show at Standpoint?**

**OB:** By the time I came up with the title "Off Grid," we were in lockdown. I wanted to reference that climate but not be so direct, because I'd been thinking about containment and restriction long before. I was eager to use the prize to do things I hadn't done previously. I imagined making a piece that had different narratives within it. So, *Kingpin* started early on and developed quite organically.

**EF: *Kingpin* has 17 parts. Did you have a set objective, or did you allow the work to take you where it wanted?**

**OB:** Definitely the latter, and I was quite loose with the idea that things could be subbed in and out. If I had my way, *Kingpin* would never have ended—the temptation to add another lump or another whole section doing something else was too great without the spatial limits of the door and the corridor. I was looking back at my doodles to see where *Kingpin* might have been generated, but it was really happening in the work.

“ I was bringing bags of shredded material back from the office and wanted to find a way of using that hideous amount of waste. ”



**EF: *Kingpin* feels quite coquettish because it gives and withholds at the same time. How important was it to make a work that can't ever be seen in its entirety?**

**OB:** For a show at Lily Brooke Gallery, I made a sculpture constructed with two walls; when they were joined, you couldn't see the inside workings of either section, even though I had labored on them. It made me reflect on how we construct our domestic setups or even ourselves—the outward-facing version and inner structures. I was also thinking how exciting it would be to make a work where you could imagine the underside or left viewpoint, but the actual experience of seeing that perspective was not at all what you expected.

**EF: You may resist gendered readings, but I find the curves, bulges, and orifices of *Kingpin* to be very feminine.**

**OB:** I always gender my work. I almost can't help it. Each work ends up with its own character, so it's natural for me to personify them. *Kingpin* is absolutely









**Kingpin,**  
2020.  
Steel, polystyrene,  
chicken wire, foam,  
newspaper, UV-resistant  
PVA, paint, plaster,  
funnels, and powder-  
coated steel stands,  
270 x 450 x 250 cm.

female; in the funnel sections, I was thinking about multitasking and holding things up. That's why I was so pleased with the title which teases out that gendered aspect. "Queenpin" wouldn't have worked, but why can't we make a woman the king?

**EF: What is the appeal of handles and funnels?**

**OB:** They're practical, helpful objects. Handles have appeared in my work for a long time. I've always liked the reaffirmation of touch because the texture in my work is so built up that a handle is another nod to the hand. I also weld them onto my armatures as I'm going along as placeholders or notes to myself to keep that bit raw. In *Kingpin*, whenever I was attaching a handle, I was thinking, "This bit has to be on the outside, it's a part for holding or lifting."

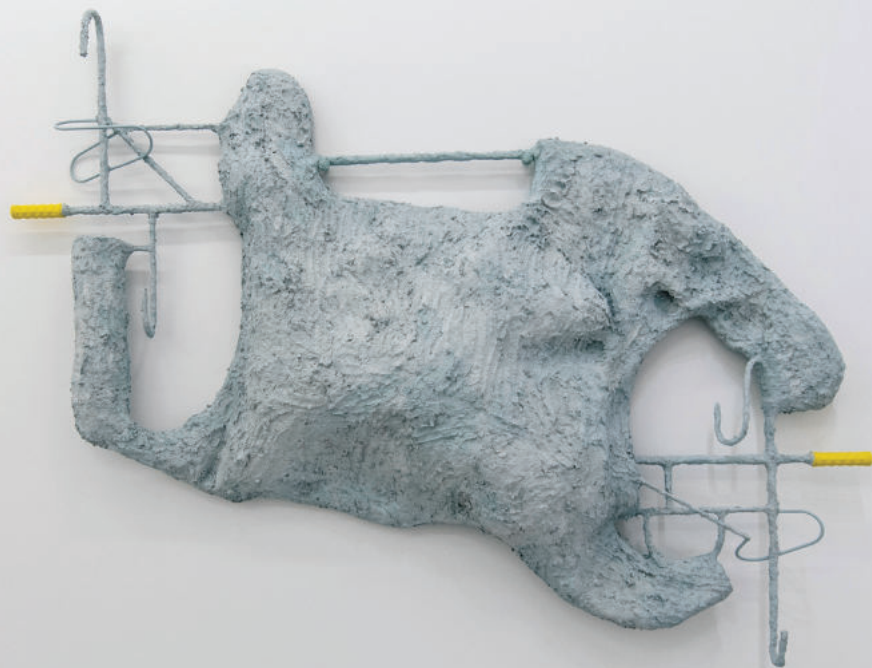
Funnels are a much more recent development, and they grew out of the recurring container shape. I'm interested not only in the form, but also in the function and the associations—since there's so much water in my material, I think a lot about draining. Because my forms are often wonky, changing from different angles, I think it's interesting to insert an object that is the same from every angle. It's like a symmetrical grounding point in a made world where nothing is symmetrical.

**EF: You seem to be interested in supporting roles, in things like pockets and handles that don't perform the main, useful job.**

**OB:** That's fair. They're overlooked, and they could also be wrong in a certain way. In mainland Europe, for instance, people keep their balconies beautiful and neat, whereas here they're often dumping grounds. I'm interested in extensions to spaces and spaces that are not easy to define. Is it outside or inside space, is it yours or mine? Sometimes balconies can reach across other peoples' properties—there's an idea of add-ons, of sharing or compromise. I find all those conversations curious.

**EF: Much of your work nods to functionality, but in *Juicer*, for instance, the pipes are just rods.**

**OB:** The concerns of making naturally lend themselves to thinking about function. *Juicer* sat in my studio for a year because I wasn't sure about it. It was just a flat top, but any surface area would have stuff on it. I ended up having conversations with myself like, "Well, it would be boring if that was just sitting on top, it needs



THIS PAGE:

**Hot Spot,**  
2018.

Steel, chicken wire,  
newspaper, UV-resistant  
PVA, paint, plaster,  
handles, and hooks,  
150 x 201 x 22 cm.

OPPOSITE:

**Kingpin (detail),**  
2020.

Steel, polystyrene,  
chicken wire, foam,  
newspaper, UV-resistant  
PVA, paint, plaster,  
funnels, and powder-  
coated steel stands,  
270 x 450 x 250 cm.

to fall through, and then if it falls through, maybe it's a funnel shape that looks like it's generating another huge form that feels full, like it's going to explode." I enjoy the fact that people can put their own interpretations on everyday uses because it makes the works more relatable.

**EF: What is the relationship between your sculptures and real objects?**

**OB:** I'm definitely attracted to things that I see and observe. *Portal* has a direct relation to rubbish chutes and scaffolding. As a way of trying to understand what attracts me to certain things, I draw them really quickly, either when I see them or after the event as a memory. I have notebooks filled with doodles, but they're just notes. When I'm building in the studio, I never look through them for reference.

**EF: The "Grille" works obviously recall window grills, but the attached elements disrupt the neatness of the form and, to me, suggest fragments of pots that fell off the sill and got caught in the bars.**

**OB:** Those works were really instinctive; when I was in Milan, I was drawn to the window grills. Because they're made of steel, I got the idea straight away that they could be a working armature. They sat like that for quite a long time, and it wasn't until I was well into *Kingpin* that I started to think of how forms could be growing in and around them, breaking up the rigidity of the structure.

**EF: What about plinths? They're noticeably absent from your work. Is that related to your experience working for Anthony Caro before you did your MFA at the Slade?**

**OB:** I've got a bit of a phobia about plinths. There's something redundant about them in sculptural terms because they're the same all the way round. It might also be the Caro influence and being particularly excited about his breakthrough '60s pieces that eradicated the plinth. He was very elderly when I worked for him, always stationary when he was directing assistants, and I thought about how that affected his work, making it about one viewpoint. That was quite a realization for me; I decided that I wanted to be a three-dimensional sculptor.

**EF: You worked in Caro's studio for four years. What else did you learn from him?**

**OB:** He was brilliantly open-minded and supportive. I learned so much from the pleasure of trying to work something out in someone else's head. It removes all the anxiety you might have in your own studio and makes you see what to do and what not to do. When I started with him, my work was in steel and quite polished; he used to say, "Don't make things too well because it takes the art out of it." I worked on a series of bronze sculptures with him, and he was keen not to use patinas because we had made them in wax and our fingerprints were very much on the surface. He talked about keeping the signs of making visible, which had a monumental impact on the work.

**EF: Was your choice of materials a reaction to Caro?**

**OB:** I was around steel five days a week, so the last thing I wanted to do was make work in steel in my own studio. I couldn't bear working with it—the associations with masculinity were too intense. When I started discovering other materials and playing with them, Caro was enthusiastic. I was using paper, foam, and wood, and lots of different, quicker materials, which









definitely changed my work. I didn't make anything in steel for years, until recently, when I discovered how useful thin steel can be for drawing in space and armature-making.

**EF: When did you start using pulp?**

**OB:** When Caro died, I worked in the office, supporting his widow Sheila Girling and helping to plan his memorial at the Tate. We generated a lot of paper because Sheila wanted everything printed. The pulp idea came because I was bringing bags of shredded material back from the office and wanted to find a way of using that hideous amount of waste. Now I pick up newspapers at tube stations.

**EF: Could you talk me through your process?**

**OB:** I weld together thin, malleable steel that I can bend on my metal vice or with my foot. Then, I cover bits in chicken wire and add papier-mâché to them because pulp would just fall through the holes. The pulp consists of shredded paper, discarded household paint, and lots of PVA glue, which is essential for bonding and also keeps the color rich. I use a tiny bit of plaster to take up any excess water—otherwise the pulp takes a long time to dry, and I don't want it going moldy before the water evaporates.

**EF: The works that you showed at Sid Motion Gallery in London earlier this year were multicolored. Was that a new departure?**

**OB:** Yes. It's also in *Hopper*, in the Cross Lane iteration of "Off Grid." I was mixing washes to exaggerate the undulations in *Kingpin* and decided to try it on a white sculpture. I had started the works for Sid's show and was trying to use up the ends of paints. I was thinking about patinating bronze, how you stipple on chemicals and build up different tones. While you're doing it, the surface color is completely disjointed and quite frightening; but you let the bronze sit, and the next day, you put wax on it and suddenly it looks like a whole. I did the same thing with these sculptures, using varnish instead of wax. I was pleasantly surprised when the varnish brought them together.

**EF: What dictates your colors?**

**OB:** My only real remit is that I want it to be bright and

OPPOSITE:  
**Sift,**  
2020.  
Polystyrene, funnels,  
handles, paper, UV-  
resistant PVA, paint,  
plaster, and UV varnish,  
52 x 38 x 16 cm.

vibrant. In *Kingpin*, the purple spoke to me because of Scotland, where my parents live. When you go walking, you're completely surrounded by vast stretches of purple heather and you feel tiny. The color also works because it is quite human—fleshy, bruised, and expansive. The paint for the "Grille" works looks like a different tone of heather, but it also reminded me of clay.

**EF: Then there's the surprise of the smooth yellow Rollers, which some visitors thought were part of the gallery furnishings.**

**OB:** I felt that if I was introducing something different, it had to be the polar opposite to make the made work look more made. The *Rollers* were already doing something different because they don't just allude to function—you can actually sit on them. I was quite sad when people thought they were part of the gallery, because the yellow stands under *Kingpin* are the exact same color as the *Rollers*, which was deliberate. I was explicitly thinking about the idea of holding or supporting, whether people or the work.

**EF: Although these works aren't figurative, they are somehow corporeal.**

**OB:** Definitely. The form was loosely taken from the idea of a passing place on the single-lane roads in rural Scotland. There's something humbling about the idea of always looking out for someone coming in case you have to pull off. I was thinking of people navigating around the sculptures and how they could fall into these benches to let someone else move and build that sense of cooperation which we seem to have forgotten.

**EF: You were born in Singapore, moved to Scotland at the age of eight, and have lived in London for a number of years. How do you feel your background has impacted your practice?**

**OB:** I used to say that I pulled references from the urban setting, but recently agricultural references are seeping in. I describe the "Grille" works as window grills, but I'm also always looking at hay feeders and cow troughs. In the recent works, there is a lot more rural influence, and the play between the two is interesting. London is frantic—you get the feeling of working and working almost to exhaustion—and then there's Scotland, the only place where my head can just slow down. ■