

**Thing-power through the skin:  
a response to Gaining Ground,  
a series of ten collages by  
Jevan Watkins Jones**

Some things are made to last. Some things aren't, but they last anyway.

We live in a mechanised globalised economy based on continual consumption. As we move through our days we trigger a spray of ephemeral items which hold our attention only as long as they are useful, thereafter falling from view.

A pack of screws for a small repair job comes in a plastic clam-shell; their purchase generates a receipt, a dab of tape attaches this to the clam-shell. Why would you notice the texture of the tape, or the colour of the receipt, or the flex of the clam-shell as you squeeze it lightly in your hand? To do so might lead you back along the dizzying complexity of the supply chains that brought these items from distant disparate places and held them ready at the point where you could take them, briefly, into your possession.

Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeleles said that once an object becomes rubbish it sheds all materiality. Texture, dimension, weight, density cease to apply and every type of object is tipped in together. (Later though, in the Materials Recovery Facility, masked operatives will work hard to sort the rubbish according to those same qualities).

Over several decades, ephemeral objects have been presenting themselves to Jevan Watkins Jones. Even as their function is discharged, their materiality has continued to have a hold on him: a receipt crammed into a pocket and crumpled in an unusual way, a scrap of sandpaper with a distinctive perimeter, a brittle strip of masking tape that has lost all tack. These things, and many others, are added to his bank of materials. Philosopher Jane Bennett has written about how 'thing-power rises to the surface' making 'objects appear more vividly as things, that is, as entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which humans set them' (Bennett, 2004).

For Watkins Jones this 'thing-power' is felt through the skin: through touch, through holding, placing and repositioning. During a tour of the work conducted by video link, Watkins Jones guides me over the completed collages. They are not yet framed. As he brings my attention to a crinkle in a strip of fabric tape, or to the curved edge of a fragment

of card, he nearly touches the surface. Nearly, but not quite; instead he cups one hand just above the thing and describes the feeling of moving it and then locating exactly where it needed to rest within the composition.

In *My Hands Are My Heart* (1991), Gabriel Orozco makes a simple decisive gesture: his hands mould a small lump of clay into a biomorphic form. Watkins Jones' hands are an extra sense organ. They assess and reassess each lowly thing from his bank. His hands are his thoughts.

Each thing in the collages has precise provenance. The backing sheets, for example, which form the ground of each collage, were used to roll out clay in a high school art class. This was twenty-three years ago. Yet *Gaining Ground* has no autobiographical sub-text. The things are not place-holders for the events they recall. Each retains its own specific qualities. Like the pebble in Zbigniew Herbert's poem of the same name, each thing remains 'equal to itself / mindful of its limits'.

In finding their place on a collage the things have established a body of ritual: Watkins Jones cannot seek out any particular thing but must wait for it to arrive in his possession. If it is more than two or three millimetres thick it cannot be included. He cannot fold or otherwise alter the thing from the state in which it arrived. The colour of the thing may not be used as a criteria to position it. With patience, and by observing these steps, each thing may find a place on a collage. And when it is balanced and complete, the artist is released from his intense engagement and can place the thing back before the world.

Lawrence Bradby, July 2020, Norwich

*Gaining Ground* was first shown as part of *Take a Lesson from the Ground* at Mandell's Gallery, Norwich, 01 - 29 August 2020, alongside the work of Douglas Farthing and Paul Patrick Fenner.

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Zbigniew Herbert. (2007)  
'The Pebble', from *The Collected Poems 1956-1998*.  
Translated by Czeslaw Milosz and Peter Dale Scott. New York: Ecco Press.

Jane Bennett. (2004)  
'The force of things: steps toward an ecology of matter', *Political Theory*, 32:3, 347-372, Sage Publishing.

Gabriel Orozco. (1991)  
Two silver dye bleach prints; 23.2 x 31.8 cm. Edition of 5 plus 2 artist's proofs. Marion Goodman Gallery, New York.



# GAINING GROUND

