

A STRONG AFFINITY: PROPERTIES, TAXONOMIES, ASTRONOMIES

*Text by Claire Shea
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'Words for mental processes are all derived from physical things.'

A Strong Affinity, the title for this exhibition, is taken from a 'joining' map, which is a carefully considered diagram produced by James Balmforth as a tool for thinking about his work. His diagram consists of interconnected phrases that signify mental processes, but derive from physical things – specifically, from scientific processes.

Taking this map and its concepts as a starting point and expanding its application to the sculptures of James Balmforth, James Capper and Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq, an affinity for scientific processes becomes apparent. Their works all share an interest in concepts, methodologies and processes derived from various branches of science and applied in differing ways to create their own unique sets of sculptural language.

James Balmforth's work carries a basic interest in the tenets of chemistry and physics. His work often exploits the physical properties of materials and their interactions with one another to accumulate meaning around the physical metaphors produced by materials.

Imperfect Detachment is exemplary of Balmforth's ability to create works that contain a symbiotic relationship between title, materials and form. This work is underscored by a material tension created by the contrast of the rough industrial steel underlying the precious metal, gold. Gold is a material that is appreciated for its symbolic value, which is achieved through virtue of its physical properties (as a stable material that does not oxidize). The precious nature of gold is an important material selection for Balmforth because its inherent value lends a brutality to the gesture of slicing the metal to create the 'imperfect detachment'. As with many of Balmforth's works, the title

of this sculpture derives from a scientific description of material properties. The physical properties of the materials, language and the form itself work together to give Imperfect Detachment rich meaning.

Phase Boundary is a new series of works by Balmforth that further exemplifies his ability to create layers of meaning from the simple starting point of basic material. This series develops his interest in gallium, a material he has been working with for the past year. Gallium is a material with a melting point equivalent to that of metabolic heat. It is an inorganic material that shares incredibly close physical properties to physical human characteristics. However, owing to this similarity, its use to humans as a metal is effectively redundant.

Phase Boundary is produced by mixing and melting gallium and fat. These materials share temperature thresholds at which their structures change abruptly and spontaneously. This means that they share a 'phase boundary'. Their similar physical and chemical properties mean that they are both equally reactive to temperatures. Phase Boundary captures the result of mixing these organic and inorganic materials and their response to one another when subjected to the same temperature. The resulting forms are always random – demonstrating the unpredictability of material combinations. These works call attention to boundaries that exist within the materials, regardless of their strong affinities.

Balmforth's interest in all of these works stems from examining the physical nature of material characteristics ubiquitous in chemistry and physics. However, this interest quickly unfolds to encompass language, form and symbolism. His works often carry complex networks of metaphors that can be appreciated at face value or mined for meaning.

Looking at the work of James Capper through the prism of scientific processes, its most obvious influence stems from biology. Capper's titles, for a start, have a taxonomic quality. The titles and classifications of his of sculptures and parts are based on their shared characteristics ranging from earth-marking to offshore.

Following this biological strand, it becomes obvious that Capper's sculptures have an evolutionary nature to their development. The machines are created by Capper and gradually equipped with 'parts' to allow them to become more sophisticated navigators in specific environmental settings – providing them with characteristics that develop in a suitably Darwinian manner. For instance, Keys are small metal plates that can be slotted into place, allowing the machine to operate more effectively when maneuvering across ice.

Furthermore, Capper's sculptures often exhibit mimetic representations of animal movements, such as spiders and caterpillars. Capper observes how certain animals navigate various surfaces and brings these biological characteristics to bear on the language of engineering to produce sculpture that has character and a distinctive aesthetic. The functionality and technical refinement of these sculptures mean that Capper's sculptures actually achieve what could otherwise only be imagined.

Finally, Falling Stars, a work by Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq, is appropriately titled for considering his work from the point of view of astronomy. Falling Stars demonstrates Qasim Ashfaq's concern with making works that have a harmonious relationship with space. His sculptures have an atemporal and supernatural feel – they seem to be from out of this world. Similarly to falling stars in astronomy, Qasim Ashfaq imagines these sculptures as stars that are still falling. This is

fitting with an astronomical understanding of falling stars; phenomena which cease to exist when they impact with the earth (and are transformed into meteorites).

Qasim Ashfaq employs polished black metal to achieve the elegant and refined forms he imagines and appreciates this material for its void of symbolic associations. This lack of symbolism enables him to create works that seem like ritual objects. These works bear a relationship to astronomical artifacts from throughout history, such as the Egyptian and Mayan pyramids, but also relate to forms of contemporary science fiction, such as 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Qasim Ashfaq relies on his imagination to conceptualize formed objects developing through a method of 'reverse engineering'. His works are often geometric in form, but not drawn directly from geometry or mathematics. His sculptures derive from a simple image in his mind, that he envisions with spatial and proportional accuracy. He then draws the work and develops a maquette that is eventually produced using high quality materials and finishes to achieve a final form, just like he imagined, such as Falling Stars.

Although their sculptures manifest in distinctive forms, James Balmforth, James Capper and Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq have varied intellectual and practical approaches to their work that could all be seen to stem from different branches of science. They have each applied these scientific processes in various ways, in combination with mental processes to produce physical things that are rich in form and meaning. Their works have certain affinities, however this interest exists predominately in their abiding to structures of knowledge, language and form to achieve new horizons for sculpture.

¹ Robert Smithson and Jack D. Flam, *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings*, Documents of Twentieth-Century Art (Berkeley ; London: University of California Press, 1996), xxviii, 389 pages at 61.

References: Smithson, Robert and Flam, Jack D. (1996), *Robert Smithson, the collected writings*, Documents of twentieth-century art (Berkeley ; London: University of California Press), xxviii, 389 pages.



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James Balmforth
James Capper
Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq
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