GRANT MOONEY

Profile by Francis Whorrall-Campbell
Art Monthly no. 491,
November 2025

The New York-based artist deploys techniques from jewellery-making alongside a minimalist visual grammar to keep the meanings of materials as open as possible.

Art, according to Theodor W Adorno, has a 'double character', at once an autonomous practice and a '*fait social*'. Irreducible to society, it nevertheless springs forth from these material conditions, pointing both away and towards this context. As such, one might posit that art – in this reading – is cut from itself, split and splayed in its identifications. The shining and patinated surfaces that constitute the appreciable forms of Grant Mooney's sculptures unfold a similarly paradoxical world of dimension and compression, scoring into the affinities of the material world and its rhetorical abstraction.

Among the five works that make up 'sphere music', Mooney's current exhibition at London's Chisenhale Gallery, this formal cut is most obviously manifested in the untitled gesture of removing all 126 glass panes that make up the high windows across the gallery's far wall. By cutting through the borders of the building, Mooney brings more light and more air into the space, altering the circulation of such elements through this former factory. Seemingly already airy in its open-plan layout, this change in the building's atmosphere registers as an almost unnoticed feeling, perhaps, but it is this slightness of gesture that is important, as if this hairline difference might be enough to force open a whole raft of counterfactuals. And, indeed, the removal of a few millimetres of glass *is* enough to enact changes, not only to bodies that pass through the building, but also to the objects Mooney has placed in the gallery: the parts of two rotary motors (their steel blades arranged in three neat piles) and a cuttlebone embedded in a silver-plated ingot and hung on the wall. Over the course of the exhibition, the volatile currents of air and moisture, entering through the windows and circulating around the bodies of the viewers, will slowly cause the plating to oxidise; another slight and surface cut into the supposed stability of a material system.

The use of Chisenhale's architecture to effect and register change is part of a number of Mooney's strate-

gies, including his exhibition 'reserves' at Midway Contemporary Art in Minneapolis last year. The first exhibition at the gallery since it closed for renovation in 2022, Mooney chose to incorporate five concrete panels that were once the building's second floor into series of sculptures. Placed in two unequal stacks, the eponymous sculpture *reserves* affirms the horizontality of the material's former use as much as it *lifts* itself above this reference. The movement from being the floor to being on the floor (and indeed the sculptural components raising each other up off this surface) reverses the original building's construction and use, but it also solemnly partakes in the visual grammar of Minimalism. The floor's potential as a surface for display, contra to the verticality of displaying painting, is the primary way minimalist artworks 'discover and project objecthood', in the words of Michael Fried.

Yet Mooney's work slips somewhat away from Fried's famous formulation of Minimalism as 'literalist art'; instead, his sculptures develop the treatment of an object into an expanded and less locatable set of references and feelings. For instance, the rotary motors that make up *Stalls (τ.)* and *Stalls (τ.) ii* have been disassembled before being refinished, reshaped and recomposed on the poured concrete floor. Prior to these processes, the motors and blades might have been employed in the building's infrastructure, but by stripping them to their material and geometric forms crucial information is removed, introducing a gap into their usual legibility; a deficiency that results in an excess of possible meaning. Thus, the reduction of these objects takes away their rotary power, yet at the same time catalyses another set of associations between reduction and rotation in the motion of the abrasive polishing of their surfaces – a poetic association that is visited upon the object by material processes.

Rotary motors also featured in Mooney's exhibition 'calcis' at Wesleyan University's Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery last year where they were accompanied by rectangular troughs filled with water, over which was placed a long steel rod. The arrangement took a formal cue from the process of electroplating, a reference made more explicit in a similar series of works shown at Progetto, Lecce in 2023, where Mooney immersed steel wire and objects into stagnant water. Here, the troubled alignment of Minimalism with literalism is most visible, as these works refuse to collapse the former onto the latter, invoking instead a multiplicity of meaning that is not reliant on rep-resentation but is inhered in the selection of material and objects themselves. Mooney's refusal to overdeter-mine his medium can be traced back to his foundation in jewellery-making. The artist approaches material through the techniques and processes common to this trade, but instead of aiming for mastery over the metal, as a jeweller or metalsmith might, Mooney is more con-cerned with the interactions the work might invite and less with the essential properties of form.

The cuttlebone is a repeated motif in Mooney's wall-based works. For example, his contribution to the 2024 Whitney Biennial consisted of many shells or their casts mounted in folded leaves of plasticated

metal. In *Fe (i)*, created for Chisenhale, the bone is spliced between two blocks the same size and shape as an ingot of cast iron or metal polishing compound, bringing these large-scale industrial processes to the intimacy of the mollusc's internal shell. Cuttlebone is a key component in an ancient technique for casting jewellery and other small objects, where the soft shell is cut and carved to make a mould into which molten metal can be poured. Its chemical composition renders cuttlebone suited for such a process; but the particular size, shape and exact mineral make-up of each shell is determined by the conditions of the seawater in which each individual cuttlefish lived, ensuring that the technique can never quite be standardised or reduced to the sum of its parts. In Mooney's presentation, the cuttlebone arrives in excess of all these interactions it indexes – at once a literal impression of its chemical production, it is also a matrix of possibility.

This possibility is less material than it is poetic. Captured in its silver mount, this shell is itself a precious decorative object; it is not a substrate awaiting an additional, artistic impression. More visibly than the fans, which declare themselves in their undone materiality, the bone's supplementation and display represents as much as it enacts the processes of its own shaping. This issue of visibility is catalysed again in 'sphere music' by the titular work – an aluminium wind harp installed on the Chisenhale's roof, the vibrations of which are transmitted into the gallery in visual form as a spectrogram on a monitor mounted behind one of the struts in the ceiling. A rhetorical collapse from technical to musical instruments cataly-ses Mooney's investment in 'anti-form', which he defines as that which takes shape by materiality alone in the absence of a referent. The unseen and unheard harp is not removed from the building to create space for the imagination to fill that gap with meaning, but rather as a material fact: the artwork does not demon-strate itself to the viewer but rather, if one carefully observes the operation of the space, integrates itself into building's circuitry and aerodynamics as a kind of footnote to the information already disclosed.

A footnote on the ceiling, lightness invoked by the dead weight of fans lying on the floor – although these oppositions might invite a reading of Mooney's practice where inversion is a central logic (think too of the relation between the die and the cast), what is much more apparent is his attention to the volume that exists between these surfaces. This chamber, this threshold – this *cut* – is a precondition for the indeterminacy that Mooney is both setting up and revealing, allowing me to paradoxically reduce down his practice to one very narrow proposition: that everything within its scope remains open with possibility.