

Simon & Tom Bloor
Feeney Fellowship 2014

As artists whose work evolves from our experience of Birmingham's urban history and landscape, concrete is a material that is close to our hearts, and the Feeney Fellowship has allowed us to spend some dedicated time experimenting with concrete's possibilities as a sculptural medium. We had used concrete in our practice prior to being awarded the Fellowship, though this was primarily through our public realm works where we had outsourced work to fabricators. Support from the Feeney Trust has enabled us to confidently incorporate concrete into our studio practice, as well as leading on to reassessing our use of other materials, most significantly plaster.



Seven Acre Ruins, 2014
Cambridge
Concrete walls fabricated by Evans
Concrete, Derby to our design

We took part in a two day 'Casting in Concrete and Plaster' course at London Sculpture Workshop. The course was the starting point for a series of new works experimenting with moulds using everyday items (plastic cups, drinks cans) which has gone on to be a key component of several recent sculptures. During the course we were introduced to 'Fibrocem', a specialist casting concrete which we experimented with in the studio and used to develop our own concrete mixes.



L to R: Making a plaster mould for concrete casting, detail of resulting concrete object, plaster cast using plastic cups

After trying materials like Fibrocem and cement fondue we experimented with making cheaper and more lightweight concrete mixes using aggregates such as marble dust, cat litter, polystyrene as well as glass fibres. This yielded mixed results, but most of the successful attempts were fine for small scale sculptures. This experimentation has led to some surprising shifts in our thinking about materials, in some cases the realisation was that concrete simply isn't the best medium to use, often for practical reasons (for example due to concrete's weight or how brittle it is), we have also been thinking about the conceptual reasons to choose different materials and sometimes plaster has been the more interesting option. We are interested in concrete's association with the built environment, it's relative strength and permanence, but plaster is a material that, for us, is more associated with sculpture, fragility and impermanence. In addition to using concrete our Feeney Fellowship has reintroduced us to working with plaster, and looking at how the two materials inform each other.



Experiments in concrete and readymade moulds

Throughout the fellowship we became much more aware of the difficulty of using concrete in our relatively small studio, principally a lack of space in which to work and store the results has been an issue for us. The Fellowship enabled us to take on a temporary studio space in which to experiment and produce works, some of which developed into work for a solo exhibition in Leicester. We made work using both concrete and plaster, and adding pigment, fibers and plasticizers to plaster to appear more concrete-like. Thanks to the Feeney Fellowship we were able to buy and experiment with a wider range of concrete materials and buy tools to mix and finish concrete and plaster. We also looked into more industrial equipment such as cement mixers and vibration tools. Useful though these things are for larger scale applications, most advice was that they'd be unnecessary for everyday use in the studio.



Details of cast concrete works, Urban Studies, De Montfort University gallery, Leicester

Over the two years we met with a fabricators and other artists who have used concrete and discussed the practicalities and difficulties of producing works in concrete on a larger scale than we currently have been. We met with specialist concrete manufacturers including Evans Concrete and Wheelscapes, a company who specialize in designing and fabricating concrete skate parks. We are now working with them on some 'skateable sculptures' as part of a development in Cambridge.

The Feeney Fellowship has enabled us to take our work in directions we simply wouldn't have otherwise. We continue to be excited by this new direction. Where we have spent several years making work in situ or designing works on our computers for fabrication by third parties the Feeney Fellowship has given us the impetus to get back into the studio, producing and experimenting with new ideas and materials, something we have greatly missed in our recent practice. As with so many things, the more we've researched the more we realised how little we know, so our research and experimentation continues.



Selection of concrete sculptures and experimental works made during the Fellowship