

Aesthetica

Interview with Emilie Pugh

Natural Perception was an art show recently curated by Aretha Campbell at 68 Dean Street, a Georgian House in Soho. The apt and stunning venue showcased the work of eight artists including Henry Hudson, Mat Chivers, Emilie Pugh, Nancy Fouts, Dr. Victor Schroeder, Guy Archard, Phoebe Dickinson, Adeline de Monseignat, Sam Pelly, Yun-Kyung Jeongs and Camilla Emson amidst the wooden beams and cobwebs. The show was a take on Darwin's theory of Natural Selection. Emilie Pugh, whose work consists of a gentle union between the permanence of ink and the volatility of burning incense-marks into paper, was one of the artists. Emilie has recently secured an artist residency in Berlin to begin this year, and Aesthetica speaks to Emilie about her work.



Artwork by Emilie Pugh

Her work seems to both antagonise the altering state of the natural world, and clasp it, as she draws on what we can't see and what we can't always understand. The layering of this semi translucent material combined with the deliberately rendered punctures and marks create a sense of something stirring and shifting constantly. They are very subjective works. There is a kind of relief in looking at art which softly suggests an explanation for something we cannot always put our finger on.

A: You mainly draw – is there a reason you have focused particularly on this medium?

EP: I love the immediacy of drawing, the delicate subtleties that can exist within it. I tend to draw with individual lines rather than tone to trace contours and feel around an unfolding thought or sensation. I am intrigued by the point of contact between the artist and surface; how the viewer can trace the hand or arm movement to unravel the drawing. I like how the largest arcs are my maximum arms reach and the smallest the flick of my wrist. I think drawing has the capacity to lure the viewer towards it, rather like a whisper might compel you to lean towards it. My drawings are often very detailed and time-consuming. It's important to me that they do take time; it becomes a kind of record. I feel energy and time gets embedded in the drawing and can be sensed when you look at it.

A: So in terms of process how do you begin?

EP: I begin each piece with little concept of the final product. I work intuitively. The slowness of the process allows me to respond as I go to emerging formal relationships, as I try to draw around unfolding thoughts or emotions. I see them as a kind of Mindscape- A map of an interior landscape.

A: So if you begin with little concept, what inspires you to start?

EP: The work I do is influenced by everything I've looked at before. It's like digesting all these images and ideas-everything from cognitive science MRI scans and neurological maps to Buddhist philosophy and Nature, distilling them and letting them come into play almost unconsciously. I am working on a series called Breath and a series called Pulse at the moment. These are the two things that keep us alive but that we are never even conscious of. What does it feel like to inhale and exhale? What happens when you really slow down and really notice, see, hear and feel?

A: In your recent work you have been burning with incense. Can you tell me a bit more about it?

EP: I have been drawing marks by burning through semi translucent Japanese Gampi paper using a lit incense stick. I layer drawings on top of each other, either stretched over screens and placed on top of each other or pasted directly onto paper or panel. I've also been combining these burnt drawings with ink drawings by pasting them directly on top and then redrawing over them with a minute brush. I am dealing with ephemeral, temporal subject matter so it seems like such an appropriate medium to express this in. The idea that you can create an image through a process of reduction of surface and material – i.e. the disintegration of the paper as I burn away the marks and incense stick burning away to ash, in order to make the image exist, is really amazing to me.

A: I like the antithesis between burning with incense and the almost watery nature of your drawings. Have you ever thought of it like that?

EP: I like that you said that as I haven't. I actually see them as the same thing in a way. I look at waves, streams, clouds, smoke and flames in the same way. What they all have is an ever changing, moving, transient nature. It's that quality that I'm drawn to.

A: Your recent show Natural Perception therefore was a good title for the show?

EP: Yes absolutely, it taps into two very crucial preoccupations of mine! I am fascinated with how ones mind interacts with the environment. I study how things in nature grow and scientific images of the brain, like neurological maps of neurons and dendrites.

A: So people must have asked you this before, but do you have a difficult relationship with colour?

EP: I can see how it seems like I have an adversity to colour but it's actually far more an obsession with line, and the potentials that can exist within it alone. I find colour adds a whole new dimension to a work, I'm trying to figure out how far line can do what I want before I begin using colour. That will be a whole new chapter.

A: What other mediums are you interested in expanding into?

EP: I want to start experimenting with light. I've tried layering up screens of burnt drawings and placing them over a light bulb. It creates a really interesting effect -that sense of shifting forms becomes more visible. I've also started drawing with gunpowder, which is completely out my control! The smoke marks the explosion leaves behind are extraordinary. I love the paradoxical nature of creating something so beautiful and subtle out of something as fierce and violent as an explosive. I've been using pins and thread to create these grids over my drawings, I see these as drawings in space. Pushing this idea, I want to break right into the space I have visions of hundreds of threads stretched across space.

A: Do you find it difficult to name work?

EP: I find titling very difficult. Unless I know the title before I tend not to. Titles are really powerful- it can completely change the way you look at a work. My works have an ambiguity to them. I like leaving as much as I can to the viewers own interpretation.

Words by Claire Mitchell. May 10, 2013.