

Artistic Orchestration in Play

Five Seasons, Tokarska Gallery, 14-28 January 2012

Five seasons is a showcase for a quintet of artists who have emerged as a dynamic collective via Middlesex University. The work crosses the boundaries of drawing, painting, two and three-dimensional mixed media installation, under curatorial direction of artist Subash Thebe.

At the private view in January in truest Winter, I was keen to be reminded that Spring, Summer and Autumn would inevitably come, as promised by the show title, and to discover the meaning behind the suggestion of a mysterious fifth season.

The first of three white gallery spaces at Tokarska is filled in dramatic fashion by a floor level triad configuration of pristine white wellington boots and umbrellas against dark wood flooring. *It's Raining* by Mette Tofte Philipsen made playful Scandinavian fun of London's rain, while cleverly providing ergonomic encouragement for visitors to come in, round and past into the warm, dry shelter of the gallery space.

This experience of rain without water reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* led on to a series of drawing and mixed media collages by Melissa Burn entitled *Lines of Flight*. Meticulous assembly of line, textural sample, and found images, as four visual catalogues of nature abstracted on a single plane. Habitats and non-human inhabitants of land, sky and sea captured as moveable units and translated and processed into an abstract re-imagining.

Subtle selection and structuring offers poetic even allegorical seasonal tableau. However, order and emphasis on process subdue the elements of sun, wind, rain, heat, cold, wet in this highly aesthetic work. Nature is fixed, stilled, the seasons documented and tamed. We recognise nature, process the artist's visual coda of information, but cannot set foot here to smell or feel the seasons.

From this silent replica of our surrounding world, the work of Subash Thebe is driven by spontaneous abstract expression to music with *Soaring Spirit* inspired by classical pianist and composer Rachel M Davis. Vivid textured green oil strokes and mark making across four square warmly reflective brass plate canvasses emote movement and humming grass in sun. The promise of summer?

Reviewing my seasonal journey so far, I find that in the space of three works I am denied but asked to relate to the literal truth of rain on my body, to accept and acknowledge a cerebral visual translation of my surrounding world, whose structures keep me viscerally at arms length. Now a sensory response to colour and materiality is prompted in the context of artistic expressionism. I am called to engage with the spirit through bodily response. It seems I must change and modify my responses as a human presence, the viewer, to engage with each piece in turn,

And so, on to a series of works which introduce a human presence to *Five Seasons*. Polly Saunders large-scale charcoal work on paper *History is a Fiction* overlays fragments of historical paintings in line and tone to question perception, knowledge and recognition. This piece sets the viewer on a journey to unpick this constructed palimpsest. The layering is at once totally familiar as nudes, decipherable as specific nudes on the paper and nameable as actual art historical males dependent on knowledge and recall. The work is tactical incompleteness, a game of recognition, which asks what is enough reality to appear real? Forced to assign and reassign body parts, the image gathers a mutable shifting status that we wish would settle into familiar boundaries. They don't, but rather crystallise, then recede from the conglomerate nude.

Though human scale this work remains historically distant in time, and distant in that it eludes resolution by the viewer. Polly Saunders didn't give me any clues and I am still puzzling.

By contrast three works by Jakub Ceglarz: *Cipa z Uszami*, *Mr Zebra* and *Homemade Child-Boy* jolt us into direct human physicality through making, worn underwear and photographic reality of a male belly with an embryo doodle. The vivid personal writing accompanying each relic of a life very much lived, has punch and is shot from the hip, apparently autobiographical and unedited. We are in the fundamental territory of mother, sex and conception.

The concept of the body, immersion in too much information from one particular artistic body. Now we are asked to use our body and interact with the art, be the creator in response to the question *Rub My Back And I Will Give You Art*, posed by Subash Thebe by an interactive T-Rex toy. Sensors open to manipulation by all private view comers, T-Rex spits magenta paint at the unbleached cotton of a canvas placed within range. Very much present, in the moment and up for it by now, my only disappointment is that T-Rex, like *Mr Zebra* was spent creatively having worn out his lifespan and given all in terms of his magenta ammo. The end of summer, where all is harvested in and the days wane?

Finally a sense of the Winter I left at the door within the rear gallery space. Mette Tofte Philipsen presents a series of once vinyl record discs covered and painted to white landscapes of bare branches. The stuck state of objects once made to revolve and play is emotive of the white out snow bound hush of deep winter. Co-located with a complex sculptural piece of interlocking geometric wood forms, my mind leaps to snowflake repeat formations and DNA molecules and formations, a sense of regeneration below hard wintery ground.

This exhibition offers a digest and translation of the surrounding world, which as either allegory or construction is uninhabitable by the viewer. It asks the viewer to empathise with rain, sun in the absence of either and to play with the art and engage with the idea of the artistic spirit, that which springs and flows from doing and making. It introduces the human body at distance and again at in your face proximity, all underpinned by a sense of seasonal truth of the cycle stopping, silently renewing before beginning again.

The journey through these works forces an internal dialogue within the viewer who must question and adjust their sense of the real and non-real. The viewer is constantly asked to position, re-position his or herself in the context of realities presented by the work. What is my reality? The only measurable is my state, the state of each viewer within the show, not constant, but each consistently in a state of truth, each navigating the realities of self, in flux, in relationship with the art.

Change is as inevitable as the seasons. When art affirms the reality and inevitability of something as fundamental to our belief systems as the seasons but playfully messes with our known realities of that very same, then what is left but for the viewer to look within for a barometer to monitor seasonal fluctuations, that new reality, to adapt and evolve? My responsive barometer must be me. Me, and my reality begin to cycle and join the play. I become the fifth seasonal dimension, orchestrated by this quintet it seems.

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