

A Discreet Music

Discreet? This is one way of describing the International 3 gallery, which nestles between Piccadilly train station and a former tutor's flat. It felt dead glamorous, aged 18, to be invited to that flat for an end of year party. That was a fleeting but pleasing mood, much like aspects of this show. There's something in this psychogeography beyond its trendy broadsheet appropriation.

The doors are impermeable when I arrive. It requires confidence to ring the bell, a confidence I once lacked and probably still would had I not organised a visit beforehand. In a way however, the secrecy of the space could be seen as positive. Not because it adds a frisson of elitism to proceedings; thankfully, it doesn't. Instead, when I step into the gallery, a sense of quixotic tranquillity descends. You can still hear the heavy goods vehicles rumble by, but somehow it's not intrusive. It might be a genuine re-appropriation of urban space, both integrated and possessed of an outside perspective. I think about this when discussing the artworks with their creators.

Many ideas circulate in Sarah's work that could be related to twentieth century re-appraisals of art in the West; its serial character, and the variety of mediums used – video, sound, sketchbook – questions a singular artwork. Roland Barthes lurks in the background when she disassociates her own perspective on what she produces from what audiences may discover in it; "It's not straightforward..." The end of a temporary creative paralysis is part of the background to her series of almost six hundred numbered drawings, only four of which are exhibited here. It seems she felt she had to do something rather than carry on talking about doing it, and once the process started, it just felt good to carry on. The shadowy figures featured in a previous International 3 exhibition by Brass Art were another indirect inspiration. They skitter across the large creamy pieces of paper which are suspended, unframed, on the wall. There is no other detail for them to hide behind. Some people see the small marks, made out of Vaseline and cosmetics, as body parts; others see them as posed human figures, Sarah tells me. She doesn't want to adjudicate.

The four figures chosen from the series fade sequentially, and this, along with their particular pose, feeds into my love of the fleeting urban encounter hymned in Baudelaire and later dominant in modernism. I almost feel guilty for having my own perspective on the piece despite Sarah's openness about its meaning, but she seems appreciative and claims that some of the figures were based on such encounters. There's another link with the past; a sense that contemporary art is dominated by works which doesn't physically exist. Admittedly, the self-reflexivity of modernism and its engagement with technological advance fed into conceptual and digital turns, but a renewed concern with materiality is undeniable. Sarah's use of cosmetics was mainly to explore their physical properties and the advantages and limitations of working with them as a medium.

Tim likes the idea of creating value from cheap materials. His *Birds* are cut from a discounted birdwatching book from The Works, stuck to the wall with a no frills brand of white tack. He tells me about fake Ferraris which were bought for huge sums by collectors as limited editions once the scam was discovered and production ceased. Beyond notions of genius, the shoddy, shambolic reality of everyday life is reflected in art too, he claims. He's interested in the stories on the newspaper used for Cubist collages. One of his pieces involved chalk on newspaper, which gradually stood out more as the low grade paper yellowed on the gallery wall. *Birds* was made last year, and was unthinkingly packed up in a box before Tim was

asked to exhibit for this show. It's been displayed before, and the idea that something new will be gleaned each time these aging bits of paper are stuck to the wall is a nice one.

The sense of concealment in the gallery chimes with another of Tim's concerns, namely secret knowledge. I am let in on the fact that the birds, which are of varying sizes, aren't to scale according to their size in real life. They are actually depicted as smaller or larger dependent on the frequency with which they are spotted in Britain. At art school, he met someone who shared a desire to make things out of cardboard boxes. The two of them guarded the fact that the best place and time to acquire boxes was round the back of Tesco whilst the lorries were unloading. We speculate that the Vice Chancellor of the University of Manchester has a private, sci-fi style office in the new tin can building. It's the return of the Surrealist repressed, the fantastical in the mundane, only hopefully without Freud.

Evi's *Semi-precious*, pebbles painted to look like semi-precious stones, also explore notions of value and materiality. She's interested in illusion. Though she finds it hard to connect the traditional drawings she produced for five years in Athens with the digital, Photoshop-based work she made in Manchester before painting the pebbles, the two perhaps come together in *Semi-precious*. They have the aura and materiality of 'traditional' art, yet are possessed of the sneaky but charming conceptualism evident in Evi's Photoshopped images of her home town of Kalamata and NASA photographs of Mars. NASA themselves alter their own images, she tells me. If you see one in colour, it's a trick.

Where the pebbles get their aura from is a tricky one. I am suspicious of any claims to transcendent, magic, unknowable value in art. It's made by human beings in certain conditions. This doesn't mean we can't be moved by it, but fetishising art can have unpleasant consequences. In a related vein, Evi describes her approach to value as 'sociological'. We think it might be the persistent and wide-spread attitude that craft and skill are what matters in art which could make people look at the painstakingly oil painted pebbles and find them beautiful. Certainly Evi is unwilling to treat them as disposable after investing six months in producing them. She stresses how important it is to understand the context in which something has been produced – even ugly new buildings. It reminds me of former East Berlin architecture being mercilessly flattened to the protests of the residents. It's not necessarily that they liked all of it, but it was a part of their history which is being erased without a second thought.

As for the simultaneous integration and perspective of the gallery I mentioned earlier, Evi feels that a strong point of the exhibition is that it showcases art being produced in Manchester without dressing it up or 'selling' it in a specific way. In this, it fits well with its surroundings for me. It's come out of Manchester, it's a part of it, yet it doesn't collude with the marketing strategy adopted by the city authorities, a dubious ersatz offensive which has nothing in common with this discreet success.

David Wilkinson

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