

INLAND: MEMORIES OF SPACE

“Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.”

Susan Sontag

Sara Maher’s art is such a distinctly visual phenomenon that in many ways it resists explication since it exists most intensely and most completely as pure phenomena. That is true of all art of course but a great deal of contemporary visual art could quite easily exist as a transferable concept in another medium, losing little in translation. Much current work is also less reliant on the elements that are unique to visual art and as such, derives its form and its aesthetic from the components of its assemblage and/or the ‘character’ of the concept or theory being presented in or through the work. I feel quite confident that a good description or at least a photograph of it can quite adequately convey the nature of the experience of much contemporary art, without losing much in translation. This simply does not apply to Sara Maher’s extraordinary works.

It is becoming refreshingly more common these days to discover artists for whom an engagement with the intangible and a deep investment in the character and qualities of various mediums and materials is the central focus of their activity.

Some writers fall back on the term ‘ineffable’ when their own imaginative and linguistic powers falter in the face of rare and unique experience or a work in which ‘content’ seems to be non-existent. This is well explained thus by Susan Sontag in her essay ‘Against Interpretation’;

“What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.”¹

It is vital to experience Maher’s work itself, no words or other forms of description or recording can come close to conveying the nature of

this work adequately. Much of Maher's work appears to have come into existence through some other agency than the human hand; it has the appearance of simply having formed through some natural organic process. The maniera in this case is not present - there is none. The characteristic mark of the artist is absent, it is as if somehow the artist's ego has been sidestepped or subverted, as if the act of the artist is merely to create a means and an opportunity for materials to operate in ways which are unique and characteristic of them alone - the way ink coalesces, the way paper accepts staining, the way material eloquence can be coaxed out if led with a gentle and sensitive hand. Somehow this work is about sublimation of self on one level but curiously about deep penetration of self on another.

This work does not have a sub-text, it is entirely what it is, but it does have equivalence. It arises from experience and that experience arises from particular phenomena encountered by the artist. There are many examples of this but the artist provides some useful guidance in the following:

"In a sense, although my works are abstract they also mirror what was seen (eg; the image *Whiteout* recalls both a view seen through the ferry window when there was a whiteout and a view into the mind's eye while experiencing a whiteout. It is about the fullness/density of silence. Another example, the image *Gap in the Forest* is a recollection of light coming through the trees. The outer blurry edge is both forest interior and the periphery of the mind. It is about movement in stillness and sound in silence....for example, light shimmering through leaves and wind rustling through trees."²

Maher's process seeks equivalence with felt sense-based experience and the states of mind which are instigated or engendered by those sensory experiences. Works done during her residency at Maria Island evoke stone, walls, darkness and quiet. This is the state of things as they impress themselves into consciousness in that place. The marks accrete like water wearing away surfaces and staining stone. The work grows at a steady rate through the subtle accumulation of actions of medium on/into medium. In a sense, the work grows much as the surface character

of the wall grew, naturally, unbidden, unforced and unhindered by any human sense of 'design'.

Even when the artist's decisive slicing of a paper layer occurs it is not unrelated to the natural holes and fissures which have appeared in the paper as a result of the working of the surface, the wearing out and rubbing through from repeated gestures and movements.

The work deriving from Maher's West Coast Residency in Queenstown addresses colonial incarceration, including the notion of solitary confinement, and is in some ways linked to work produced from an earlier Maria Island residency. This conceit in no way implies any undermining of the essentially intuitive elements in Maher's process, and in no way diverts her into issues of content, representation or metaphorical sub-text. This work makes abundantly clear how 'imprisonment' within a fixed and featureless bordered space only serves to force the consciousness 'out' and into the vastness of the mind – the only space which can be freely roamed and navigated.

Beyond/through the surface lies space, distance and silence – vastness. To paraphrase the artist, the contemplation of vastness confronts one with the insubstantiality of one's own being. The result of a search for self within vastness ultimately leads back to the immensity within. There is a sense that the self may only be encountered and apprehended when all familiar details and landmarks of the psyche are left behind, when ego has been all but annihilated. This transcendence has been often reported by visitors to Antarctica or Desert regions and is not unrelated to the affective aspect of the Sublime. Within Maher's work there are no illusions and no allusions. Nothing represents anything; nothing stands metaphorically in place of anything else. We have an encounter with a surface and a 'limitless' expanse, limitless in that the border of the work often merely acts as the point where the activity is no longer visible. As in certain Abstract Expressionist works the edge implies no more than a section sliced from a greater (limitless) whole. Even where the work changes from centre to edge it only pushes the eye back into a limitless centre, a void at the heart of the work.

The following observations make clear the effects of space, isolation and silence. The work from this residency owes much to solitude, which is a central defining element in the Tasmanian Government's Wilderness Residency Program.

"While on a residency at Lake St Clair in winter 2010 I began a series of works exploring this terrain. In responding to the boundaries of enormous spaces (shoreline and horizon, darkness and dawn, sound and silence), I encountered physiological and psychological thresholds of the self, namely the limits of my senses - seeing and hearing, and my own fear. It is the tension between these elements and the reverence of nature's immensity that informs my work.

"If there exists a borderline between such mental and physical terrain, it wavers and trembles: it is soft, with vague shapes and edges both devolving toward and evolving from nothingness; it reveals itself through ambiguity and contradiction."³

Apart from the large scale works on paper which is probably Maher's 'signature' work, for some years she has been working with small scale three dimensional objects. These are a largely unseen part of her practise. My first encounter with these was while she was sitting her solo show. She spent hours taking tiny delicate seeds designed to be wind-borne and placing them with tweezers one by one into a bottle until they filled it. The result was extraordinary and demonstrated to me how elegant simplicity of means and an acute sensitivity for a material can produce transcendently beautiful things.

These small sculptures were constructed from a combination of natural materials from Lake St Clair and found objects from Maher's home. Inevitably they superficially resemble Surrealist sculptures and assemblages in their reliance on chance and intuition, but they are highly considered works which eschew many of the more sensational juxtapositions we might expect of Surrealism. Many of the 'natural' elements in them have the suggestion of a human form (a face in a leaf for example), and in this sense also suggest the turning back to the self through looking into minute detail (of course this leads to another incalculable immensity), even into the sub

atomic realm. There is a distinct difference between these and works made on site which is essentially a function of the fact that they were produced on the artist's return home and are inflected by the resultant shift in her sensibility.

Maher sometimes uses sound within her exhibitions, these sound elements, created by Nigel Farley, help to associate the visual works to the experience of vastness, (and simultaneously its contradictory other - confinement). It provides a context in which sound in the landscape played an experiential part in the works origins. Like the artworks it too is essentially an 'equivalent' and a counterpoint to the artwork since it has essentially been conceived in response to them. Farley's sound is never dominant or in any way assertive and serves as an underscore – extending the artworks in ways which border on the subliminal. In that sense there is a strong relationship between the sound and the artworks which work in a similar way at the border of consciousness and intuition.

Seán Kelly

1. Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation'
2. Artist's Statements
3. Artist's Statements