Steve Hollingsworth / Annette Heyer

Visions for the Future. Part III

7 October - 18 November 2000

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Visions for the Future 3 pairs the work of two sculptors, Annette Heyer and Steve Hollingsworth. It is the third in a series of six exhibitions which aims to commission a new body of work from young artists working in Scotland. In each case the intention is to pair artists with sympathetic aims, and although the visual impact of these two exhibitions is different, common themes and complementary interests emerge.

Steve Hollingsworth's work, collectively titled somanomaneon, is shown downstairs in galleries one and two. The starting point for two of the pieces was an eleven month residency in Japan as part of the research programme at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Kitakyushu. Alienation, boredom and chance all had their part to play in the resulting works shown here: 6-0-1 Bike Wheel and The Language of Signs.

The research programme brought together young artists of different nationalities, with access to a well-stocked library, and contact with visiting artists and curators. The practicalities of making work however were affected by culture-shock, language barriers and the frustrations of trying to work in unfamiliar surroundings. The isolation which comes with these circumstances was heightened by the expense of travel. So when Steve describes the chance find of an abandoned utility bike his excitement, even now, is almost tangible. In itself, the bike was unremarkable, but the simple freedoms which it allowed - mobility and autonomy - transformed it into something more symbolic. It is this personal connection which shaped the works which were to follow.
The bike was quickly personalised with a neon tube made to fit under the cross-bar and a transformer ordered over the internet. As the bike is pedalled the energy is transformed into electricity, powering the neon light. Motion and light are connected, and the 'bog-standard' bike is transformed into a poetic version of a vital life-signs monitor.

Inevitably the bike made its way into Steve's work, in The Language of Signs. As your eyes adjust to the reddish glow you notice that the rider has a number on the back of his shirt (a lone racer), and that the shadowy forms of the playground are revealed by the line of neon light on his bike as it passes across the frame. In the distance a flashing red neon sign sets up a mute rhythm with the blue light of the bicycle's neon tube. The seamless monotony of the bicycle circling in and out of the frame matches the soporific chirping of cicadas, and the red glow gives the image a dreamlike quality.

Shown on the wall beside it is 6-0-1 Bike Wheel in which Steve pushes a found bicycle wheel around the city after dark. The neon 601 sign attached to the frame contrasts with the street lighting, car head-lamps, shop signs and the familiar paraphernalia of a modern city. Remembering the frustration of being stuck in the studio he recalls:
'it just seemed that I should get out there… It was a perfect night, it had rained and the ground was reflective, and it seemed to take on meanings as soon as I had done it. The laser hits the floor, or it can shoot out two kilometres in the distance, this going out and coming back again that I liked… It's to do with discovering, and about measuring an environment.'

Shot informally, with the lurches and wobbles of a hand-held camera, the image moves in and out of focus: one minute it is crisp and sharp, the next the lights dissolve into abstract patterns. There is something quite odd about this 'discovery' of the city. The camera tracks the wheel faithfully, so we never look up to see the skyline or to get a sense of the architecture and spaces of the city. Like a small child's viewpoint, we see Steve's trainers, the feet and legs of passers by, car wheels, head-lamps, paving stones, road markings, and shop frontages. Nearby is a crushed, beige Astra. Describing his plans for this exhibition Steve talked about crushing his car into a sphere - more complicated than the standard block which emerges from a breaker's yard. He explained that the sphere was to evoke Sisyphus' ball: 'The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour'.

This quotation comes from The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus' retelling of the myth as a parable of modern existentialism. Sisyphus is an absurd hero, 'his whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing'. Imagining the thoughts running through Sisyphus's head as he descends the mountain yet again, Camus concludes that there is potential for joy within the tragedy: unable to be deluded by false hope, Sisyphus is fully conscious of his own fate,. This lucid understanding of his condition, Camus says, is also his victory over it. It is a strangely optimistic interpretation of the myth, but one which seems to fit well with the apparently pointless rituals, willingly performed in 6-0-1 Bike Wheel and The Language of Signs.

The Language of Signs is only pointless if you imagine it as a race, something to be achieved and with a definite end. But the connection between the light and the movement of the rider transcends any other purpose. At its most basic the light is a sign of being alive; and that is enough. Similarly, the tension in 6-0-1 bike wheel comes not from the whimsical attempt to 'measure' the city, but from the erratic wobbles of the wheel and the fear that it will topple, smashing the neon sign. This shouldn't matter: the sign was a chance find of no real value, and yet the otherworldly, silvery quality of the light it emits seems precious and worthy of preserving, the anxiety of keeping it upright conveyed by the camera's dogged attempts to follow its path.

Like the bike, the car's significance comes from the fact that it is not just any car, but Steve's Astra, with all the personal history and associations which that suggests. The nondescript exterior belies the value it held for him as a 'container for dreams and travels'. Seeing it crushed and useless it could be read as a depressing loss of those dreams, but as he points out it has been transformed into another sort of vehicle, one which could transport the imagination.
The same car, before it was crushed, features in Electric Brae, pictured in front of a beautiful, twilit view across the sea to Ailsa Craig. The car is lit from underneath by neon light - the same beige as the car - which reflects off the tarmac and casts a strange, otherworldly glow. On one level the image is staged as a pun on the location - Electric Brae - but its construction suggests a connection with Romantic imagery. In this case the Romantic archetype of the lone figure in silent contemplation of nature is replaced by the neon car: not so much the lonely wanderer as the car he arrived in.

Emergence is also taken against a dramatic landscape backdrop. The lone figure stands beside Loch Lomond, arms thrown up into the air and face lifted towards the sky. It is only as you keep looking that you realise his focus is two, thin lines - one red, the other green - created by climbers' distress lights flung up towards the sky. The artificial light is almost lost against the glow of the setting sun and the point of the photograph seems to be the gesture, the captured energy of the pose, and the perfect moment of stasis as the lights reach the top of their trajectory.

In a recent essay a friend sums up the processes by which Steve arrives at his images: [his work] 'involved chance and experimentation and created something beautiful from unpromising materials.' It is this exploration of unpromising materials, and the reflection on their metaphorical associations which provides the key to Steve's work, and links it with that of Annette Heyer. The image that Annette chose for her private view card is telling: a snapshot of a model of the old Brighton West Pier, discarded at the side of a road beside a skip of rubbish. The photograph was taken at night, yellow streetlights reflecting from the rainy tarmac. The model looms forward, bleached out by the camera flash to a ghostly grey-white. Out of context, and isolated against the dark background it takes on a life of its own - skeletal, organic, improbable and full of pathos. The model doesn't appear in her show - the snap was taken just before it was picked up for restoration - but the image sums up a way of working which is intuitive and improvisational, and beyond that, a way of looking at the world which underpins Annette's work.

It's not surprising, then, to find that the starting point for 'As for the Future' , shown in galleries three and four was the gallery space itself: the fall of the light, the dynamics of different areas, the natural flow from one part of the room to another. The scene is set with an old potting table laid out with 25 lemon geraniums of varying heights and stages of growth, all from the same mother plant. The plants are individuals, but also extensions of the mother plant - effectively clones. The slow patterns of natural growth unfold over the duration of the exhibition, but they are visually condensed in the differing sizes and stages

of development of each geranium plant - a living, three dimensional equivalent of the time-lapse film.

Beyond the table lies a miniature glasshouse. A few yards separate the two things but the small scale of the structure is intended to suggest an optical illusion of greater depth, a view in perspective. Empty and isolated in the gallery space the already delicate structure of the handmade frame looks even more fragile. It is not until you get close that you realise that the glass panes have the subtle variations in thickness characteristic of old glass. The glasshouse is no man-made container for organic things, but an organic thing in itself: the glass a viscous substance which slowly changes over time. The structure is based on the form of the gallery, echoing the peaks of the glazed roof, and bringing us back to the realisation that the presence of the plants in the gallery space, carefully placed to get maximum, even light, turns the gallery itself into a greenhouse.
To the right the long expanse of the gallery wall is broken up into intervals by a series of protruding forms descending from the near end of the gallery to the far corner. Reversed half-arches are stacked to form a structure which seems to be incomplete and ambiguous. The generic architectural form is found in many cultures: it is the basic structural support for buildings and bridges, or for smaller domestic details like eaves, shelf supports and so on.

The material is cast concrete, something which could be perceived as static, yet the incomplete forms suggest further extension. There is a feeling of structural tension and dynamism too - the weight-bearing foot of the upper arch balancing on the incomplete arch below it. Talking about these structures Annette speaks of travelling through Greece and becoming aware of an improvisational attitude to construction, quite different to that found elsewhere in Europe. Houses are constructed with steel rods left sticking out, a key for the next extension to the building as children grow up and need their own homes, simply adding them to the existing home of their parents. There are echoes of the extended family of geranium plants, clustering around their source, and although the parallels are not immediately clear there is a connection between the idea of organic growth and an open-ended process of creation.
Open-endedness, growth, extension and the intuitive connections perceived in chance finds all emerge as themes in this work, and in the photographs which line the opposite wall. The circuit of the gallery brings you to the side gallery where earlier sculptures are displayed. Annette studied at Glasgow School of Art on the MA photography course, but from her student days her work has included both photographs and three dimensional sculptures. A student work exhibited in 1990 provides an interesting counterpoint to this recent work. A fine, black and white photograph of a found chalk drawing of a parallelogram scribbled on a tenement wall was placed beside a wax impression of an air vent. The creative translation of these chance finds into differing and complementary media removes the images from their everyday insignificance into a realm of metaphors and associations. Characteristically there is also an ambiguity of scale, which opens the deceptively simple images to alternative readings and responses.

For both Steve and Annette that negotiation between everyday reality and the metaphorical and poetic potential of the unnoticed world is an important factor. Although each has found their own preferred media and idioms there are surprising areas of common ground: man-made objects and technology are equated with organic nature, and by a process of transformation the fragility of life and its ephemeral nature is brought to the fore. For both artists there is an intuitive reaching for poetic readings, and a willingness to see magic in the most mundane things. During a recent interview Steve said that he hoped he produced generous work, images which resonated with many possible readings: that hope seems to apply equally to Annette's work.

A reading file is available from the bookshop desk with further information about both artists.

This exhibition is generously supported by the Esmee Fairbairn Trust,
the Robertson Trust and the Henry Moore Foundation.

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