

OVER AND OVER AGAIN, THE NATURE OF MEMORY

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There is something at once both lush and sharp about what Michelle Forsyth does as an artist. In nearly everything she makes—from small works on paper to large installations—she affirms the hand-made. From a distance her works often lock into representation, a suggestion of narrative and place, but close examination reveals that the images are made of cutout pieces of fabric and paper, beads stitched to the paper or mounted on with dressmaker’s pins. Many of her most recent pieces have additional layers of prints on their surface. For this, Forsyth begins with hand drawing on film; she then exposes these drawings onto the screens and, like traditional fabric artisans across the world, she repetitively pushes the inks through the screens onto the paper over and over again. This is work that celebrates the laborious.

Forsyth is interested in history, specifically public and private memories of tragedies and traumas. To this end, she makes her images by embarking on a series of activities. For each of the pieces in both the *100 Drawings* and *Ostinatos* series here, she begins by researching an event through archived media; then she travels to the site where the incident originally took place and photographs the spot. Neither the tragedy itself, these well-sequenced steps, nor her conceptually loaded purpose stops Forsyth from additionally reveling in beauty. In all her work (excepting the *Text Works*) she manipulates our penchant for pleasure, loading her carefully crafted documentations with vibrant colors as if they were tapestries.

In his novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Columbian author Gabriel García Márquez referred to memory’s pathway towards nostalgia as a disease. Forsyth, born in Canada, at a colder, near opposite

end of the American hemisphere, must have a similar feeling about memory and its ability to course through time, mutating and changing along the way. Forsyth consciously photographs a chosen disaster such as *Tacoma Narrows Bridge Collapse, Tacoma, WA, November 7, 1940* years after it actually took place. The artist's deliberate acknowledgement of years passed implies that something can still be gained by remembering and seeing, as though the geography holds unseen particles of its past. In the studio, Forsyth then isolates elements from these photographic records and breaks them down further into minute units, which she finally, painstakingly reconstructs back into images again. The results are a plethora of shapes and colors with their own abstract logic that initially makes no narrative sense until we move back. Standing close to a work like *Hoboken Pier Fire, Hoboken, NJ, June 30, 1900* is akin to having used the zoom function on a digital camera or a computer. It is a pixelated image, rendered into 3-D by its compounded materials, but we only see it as a real place when we move away from it. And that, of course, is arguably the best way to make sense of our past as well.

4 | Forsyth's description of historical events fractured into tiny bits, suggests that memory could be—or should be—a kind of hologram, only truly understood within the context of its many parts.

While it is clear that Forsyth's pieces pay tribute to the handmade, it would be a disservice not to acknowledge her equally crucial engagement with technology. Describing the early stages of her process in doing research and in organizing her images, Forsyth states that she takes images "culled from television, newspapers, and the Internet..." using a grid, she translates this visual information into the vibrantly tactile work seen here, variously using cotton thread, bits of gouache painted papers, crystal and more. Conscious of the implications between her ideas and working methods, she explains, "The grid becomes a nexus between the bitmapped images [of the computer] and the hand-crafted ones." Her very language confirms the importance contemporary technologies play in her work, affirming the observations made by artist (and now theorist) David Hockney who claimed

in his book *Secret Knowledge*, that artists have always embraced the technology of their times and that the best ones turn it to the service of their ideas. Forsyth admits that freely. But in her case, she adds “I use technology to slow my process down instead of speed it up.”

This exhibition draws from three different series done over the past four years: *100 Drawings*, *Ostinatos* and *Text Work*. While both the two former series use the processes described above and are layered with colors, forms and materials, *Text Work* does something unexpected but utterly in keeping with Forsyth’s purpose. Using the same newspapers and online sources where Forsyth habitually gathers her visual imagery, for *Text Work* she eschews color and collected material. Instead she extracts the actual words that witnesses have used to describe historical events. She isolates their verbal responses the way she had formally isolated patterns from pictures, taking phrases and carefully punching them into paper. The resulting pieces are made of light and absence. The shapes that the cutout type leaves are a pentimento of text. It is a ghost of meaning and memory. Showing this simpler, quieter series in conjunction with the more layered works makes for a perfect pairing. *Edwin (eyewitness)* and *Tacoma Narrows Bridge Collapse, Tacoma, WA, November 7, 1940* demonstrate this explicitly because they both deal with the aftermath of the same disaster. But all three series work in a kind of rewarding synchronicity.

Seeing the richly layered *Ostinatos* and *100 Drawings* in conjunction with the spare, punched out ‘imagery’ of *Text Works* is a deft curatorial move. What the two different visual depictions suggest is that while we tend to understand our past by aggregate information, we also need to remember that absence of data, information and material is an equally integral part of its nature. We need both.