

INTERVIEW

The following conversation took place between the Michelle Forsyth and David Drake via e-mail during the Month of October 2008.

David Drake: We've talked about connections between your work and the ideas and strategies of the first generation of conceptual artists. Some of those connections I think are quite clear: the "Drawings" continue investigations into the philosophical problem of presence and absence, for example. But other strategies you employ I'm tempted to regard as radically different, particularly the way you approach art-as-object. Your objects are not dematerialized, demystified and stripped of their aura; rather, through craft, you've raised up humble materials (sandpaper, felt), and applied a jewel-like aura to them. You've attempted to re-invest banality with meaning, maybe even mystery.

And, I want to say, these objects you make—these traces of obsessive studio practice, of travel to the sites of used-up disasters—these objects are also unapologetic commodities. They sell.

I say I'm tempted to regard all this as differing radically with conceptual antecedents. In fact, I think this is also an area of connection: that a similar set of interests results in a drive to dematerialize and decommodify at one time, and the opposite at another.

Michelle Forsyth: I am really glad you have brought this up. It is something that I do struggle with. On the one hand I am driven by moving my work along a solid conceptual trajectory yet on the other I get fully caught up in the materials I chose to work with. I guess I was first interested in the spectacular images that these events conjured up in my mind—exploding ships, bridge collapses, burning forests—and that sense of drama is something that can be seen in the way my materials catch the eye, but what I am ultimately thinking about is how I can pay homage to what is left behind. When I traveled to the first few sites I found myself a little disappointed by what I found there. There wasn't much to see—a few dandelions or some scrap tires—but when I brought my images back to the studio and

set to work I just started trying to fill the absence with the accumulation of residue left behind by my working processes.

I think what comes into question is the photographic document. When conceptual artists began to document their working processes it opened up a new way to represent things that were more ephemeral. But ultimately the evidence was commodified too. The images of this work—and I am thinking of pieces like Robert Barry's *Inert Gas Series*, or Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*—are often beautiful. Photographic documents of disasters are also aestheticised, but the results are often more spectacular. I am interested in finding an alternative to this kind of photographic staging. And although I use historical photographs of disasters as a starting point, and re-photograph those sites as they are today, I am trying to seek alternatives to how these kinds of events are remembered.

4 | DD: When I said you're re-investing banality with meaning, I was initially thinking of the banality of some of the materials you use—the sandpaper and felt, but also the Swarovski crystals, which somehow remind me of a come-on for an item on QVC or the home shopping network. But your comment suggests there are at least two other categories of the banal at play in your work. First, there is the banality of what I guess we could call the spectacle of the disaster (following Debord) wherein every image of horror becomes drained of its power thru endless repetition (the Hindenburg, the Crucifixion, the plane hitting the second tower, the burning Vietnamese girl). And second, there is the banality of the real place where the disaster once was and is now absent. With that in mind, and with your comments on filling that absence, I am now reminded of all those ways we have learned to use the simplest and most banal of materials to enshrine the places of tragedy: the plastic flowers and stuffed teddies wedged into cyclone fencing around the site of the latest school shooting, for example. Is it possible there is an element of that in your work? A knowing use of that?

It seems to me we are driven to memorialize and make meaningful that which already plagues our memories and resists meaning anything. And that the materials we have to work with, whether plastic or platinum, are as inadequate to the task of commemorating these events as our souls are to com-

prehending them. Which is pretty flowery.

But I think there can be something truly beautiful, touching and human (in an older sense of the word) in the deeply inadequate.

MF: There is an element of this in my work to some extent, but instead of leaving something behind at the scene, I am instead drawing from it. I am certainly influenced by the ways in which people memorialize events publicly. I was living in Jersey City when 9/11 happened and watched the second plane hit the towers, but kept running into my apartment to watch it on the TV. It helped me to understand what was going on at the time, but afterward the images were played over and over, which drowned out my own experience. Lower Manhattan was plastered with photographs of loved ones and there were a lot of ad-hoc shrines and candles, which I think was ultimately a more powerful reminder of what had happened. You could really get a sense of grief from it. The first time I saw the empty pit where the towers once stood I experienced a similar feeling.

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I guess I see the detritus left at disaster sites in a similar way. What has been left behind or discarded becomes poignant for me. But I also think of my working process as a residue of a repetitive yet intimate manual labor—stitching, cutting, painting, punching, pinning—which provides a space to think about things. I need to get lost in this way in order to elevate my materials to an elegiac level. It can also be a good way to forget certain things, which is perhaps why I am in the studio so much. I also think about control, about honing my skills, and making my work as beautiful as it can be.

DD: I'm interested in how you would trace the trajectory of your work over the last 6-7 years, from the accident and water pictures, to the paintings and drawings you're making now, and to the text work you've just begun. We've talked before about the role of the sublime in that earlier work (in its fullest sense: a beautiful terror), but also the banality inherent in the source images you were using. How the snapshot, whether of a glittering body of water or the visceral aftermath of a suicide or traffic accident, renders a numb sameness to all the images (especially when seen online). And how your

transformation of those images begins to recover the impact (the sublime) the real events or vistas imaged once had.

At the simplest level, I see your current work as collapsing together what was once two separate bodies of work: the water and flower pictures now are the images of accident and death. And the scope and scale of the disasters has expanded from the personal and the unreported, to the spectacular, the historical, and the newsworthy. I wonder if there is a connection here: that in some sense, if the visible scrim overlaying the idea of a disaster is innocuous (a few flowers, a view of a river), then the underlying disaster must be something larger than an anonymous suicide or car crash.

The other shift I see is toward an increasing materiality in your work—to my mind, they have become objects, even if you still refer to them as drawings or paintings.

6 | The newest work I'm least familiar with, so I'm particularly interested in how it might fit with the ideas I've outlined here (assuming the ideas have validity).

MF: When I had first begun working with these horrific images of personal trauma and death, I was pretty unsure about what I was doing. I was initially interested in how they seemed to lose something in their endless repetition—in a Warholian sense—but I found myself staring at these images for great lengths of time and it was pretty disturbing for me. So I started working on the paintings of water. The images seemed much more benign, but when I placed them beside the others there was a striking similarity: they evoked a sense of distance. Looking back, I think something else was happening too because I was working through my emotions in those water pieces. I think that's where a kind of mourning took place for me, if you could call it that.

I was also feeling that the work I was making at that time was becoming exploitative in the sense that I was using images of other's pain for my personal gain. I didn't want to keep doing that. I also didn't want to keep making more bloody images. I wanted to allude to the same ideas without being

so explicit. So I think you've touched on something interesting when you draw a line between the spectacular nature of the disasters I am documenting on one hand and the innocuous "scrim" that I have chosen to work with on the other. I haven't really thought about it quite that way before but find it intriguing. Perhaps it is because of this gap that I have written the short paragraphs to go with the work. I think the newer text pieces are an extension of those narratives, but they also have a relationship to my Sunday Paintings from 2006.

DD: In your second answer, you said you try to make your work "as beautiful as it can be." I wonder if you can discuss at length, and pretty specifically, what constitutes beauty: for you, for the work, for the materials and imagery you work with, and for your viewers/collectors.

MF: I think there is a fine line between making something beautiful and pushing it too far, which can quickly move into the realm of kitsch, particularly when you are using things like sequins and glitter to get there. I guess that my statement about a desire for beauty seems to imply that it is my intention to focus on the object alone rather than the process of making it, but I think for me the two are intrinsically linked. Beauty emerges from experiencing a kind of reverie while making; from a place where I am completely engaged in the task at hand; when I get caught up in the loop of a brush stroke, the movement of my scissors, or am taken by a particular color resting against another, and repeat that over and over until I am somewhere else. My process can be like knitting or needlepoint in that way. The objects I make are also very important to me. I want them to be encrusted with process and almost overworked. I have always been fascinated by Rococo and all the violence underpinning it. I think this shows in the work. When paired with something tragic, I think beauty can be extremely poignant.

Maybe I threw in a loop when I mentioned Rococo. I mention it not because it is associated with beauty for me, but it is over the top and almost campy somehow. I am interested in it but think it is kitschy. Like I want to get some hints from it but transform it. I think of my work as an amalgamation of everything I have learned or am interested in. I try to pack it all in there.

I am interested in using beauty to create a place for my viewers to experience a kind of rapture in some way. Therefore, I am attracted to things that could be considered beautiful—or even sublime if you want to put it that way—and perhaps even go a bit out of my way to find subject matter that interests me on a poetic level. Flowers have become increasingly prevalent in my work. I have been seeking them out at disaster sites and have been using floral motifs in most of my cut-paper pieces as well. I think they can speak more directly about loss, both because they are so fleeting and because they are often used as a way of marking death. Manet's last paintings, completed as he was dying, were of flowers. They are filled with tragedy yet are deeply beautiful paintings.

DD: Some final thoughts: I think the beautiful (which emerges as the axis of this whole conversation) is a concept we cannot define, but only point to (either literally, or by making images). Your work, in pointing to the beautiful as it exists in situations where we don't expect it, is ultimately investigative rather than decorative--a way of asking what it means for a thing to be beautiful. It is that investigative quality which connects it with conceptualism, and Proust (it is, after all, *In Search of Lost Time*), and removes it from the actual practice of the Rococo (although I see exactly how Rococo figures in what you do, and have been doing, even back to those very early "King" paintings).