

Sanne Mestrom | Black Paintings
McClelland Sculpture Park
29 July – 11 November 2018

/ the shift from medium specificity

It is a rare treat to experience two series of works by the same artist in the same location. Mestrom's exhibitions are a sophisticated investigation into art history, human civilisation and feminism using a range of opposing mediums. This is an understated collection of work that is visually and conceptually complex - and thoroughly enjoyable to be amongst.

Freeway

The frequency of sculptures displayed along the freeway increases as you near McClelland Gallery. They are a place marker, a location identifier, a cultural signifier. Between the passengers of the car these works quickly provoke query, some bewilderment, and others joy. What I thought was a cow up a tree, was, to my delight, a telegraph tower struck by a meteorite now warped and tangled, the huge rock delicately suspended within its wreck. I feel great anticipation as I near the Gallery grounds.

Entrance to the gallery

Situated in the middle of expansive parkland dotted with sculpture adjacent to a small lake, the gallery is a low long modernist building with a few stairs up to a broad landing and entrance. There are people coming and going, the restaurant is full. The place is buzzing. A series of four oversized bright white abstract feminine-shaped sculptures frame our passage to the Gallery entrance. The works are curvaceous yet geometric, their full shapely form exaggerated. Immediately I find myself coupling Aztec totem figures with Matisse's 'Blue Dancers' who in this instance are a little weightier and a little more geometric. The women are reclining or perhaps in birthing positions. These are works by the artist we have come to see – but this is a different series of work to the intended exhibition.

Exhibition

Inside the gallery it is quiet. The bustling ceased. The work here is a rigid material dichotomy to the series outside. Inside this series consists of framed delicate gouache paintings strategically hung between a series of four freestanding iron frames each about the size of a double door, positioned at various angles to the square walls. The iron frames consist of a series of smaller squares and rectangles and each of the four large frames relate to a tapestry crafted with undyed and unspun wool meticulously woven into broad geometric patterns also reflected in the gouache paintings.

All the works in this space reflect a patchwork of warm creams, browns, grey and black squares, rectangles and triangles. They create, within the first frame, two large triangles one atop the other, pointing down; within the second, a large triangle pointing to the side; and the third, a series of diamonds diminishing in size one within the other oscillating between cream and deep earthy brown - reminiscent of a shooting target. At times the smaller square and rectangles that make-up the larger frames are left as negative spaces (not filled with woven wool) enabling the viewer to see through to the gallery or other tapestries.

The application of the woven wool on the fourth frame is quite different. In this case the frame is bare exposing smaller frames within the frame. The same material and oscillating diamond pattern is pulled into a bundle and hangs heavily outward. The smallest diamond positioned at the weightiest point of the bundle. The shape and weight are strongly reminiscent of a heavily pregnant woman's belly.

Immediately I am drawn to the warmth, and complexity of the texture and how this is juxtaposed against the rigid square iron frames. The attention to detail, meticulous labour and disciplined finish belies the organic and at times rugged textures. We can see how these works have been built, made and created. We can walk around the entire object deciphering the 'front' and the 'back'.

This body of work is in response to an American modernist painter from the 1960's, Frank Stella. Mestrom is responding to Stella's work and specifically addressing the:

- dominance of male artists within the arts and art institutions;
- view of medium specificity (that sculpture should be an object and painting should be a surface);
- dominance of Modernism (or an art movement trend) over individual artistic expression; and,

- the general disinterest in craft, or labour intensive methods of art production (historically and intrinsically linked to women's activity).

So if we consider Frank Stella's work around the 1960's, in this exhibition Mestrom has successfully created a diametrically opposite response: detailed, labour intensive, highly textured, sculptural and crafted. However there are layers of narrative and meaning knitted into this work linking it to Modernism, Mestrom's ongoing investigation into femininity, cultural anthropology, and, in this case, culminating in a distinctly Australian feel. The meticulous treatment of the raw materials, the positioning within the room, the colours and patterns all bring to mind first nation peoples, sheep, being 'female' or family - together with the use of negative space, holes and gaps, leaves me distinctly thinking about Australia's recent history.

Although materially diametrically opposed, the commonality between Mestrom's large white glossy sculptures outside at the entrance, and her large highly textured patterned frames in the gallery, is her investigation into the female form and function across cultures and time. This is a marvellous example of how contemporary artists are no longer restrained by the expectation to achieve expertise in a single medium whether that be oil paint, water colour, or clay. Artists now use a range of materials that best articulates their investigation, the artworks purpose and resolution, as well as site conditions and environment. These two collections of work are a stunning example of how artists have broken from medium specificity to realise their conceptual investigations.

Although delighted with the opportunity to experience Sanne Mestrom's works, exiting the grounds of McClelland Sculpture Park I felt supremely dissatisfied. With time a little short, I was unable to investigate the park sculptures, stroll around the lake or enjoy afternoon tea in the restaurant. I will be returning, and I'm looking forward to it.

Sanne Mestrom | Black Paintings

McClelland Sculpture Park

29 July – 11 November 2018