

Lorna Macintyre

interviewed by Kitty Anderson

Lorna Macintyre is an artist based in Glasgow working between sculpture and photography. She has recently had solo shows at Pied a Terre, San Francisco; St Peter's Church with Kettle's Yard, Cambridge and Mary Mary, Glasgow (all 2012). She is currently an Associate Artist at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge.

Kitty Anderson: *Your work often involves a period of historical research around the site or context in which you are working. This has sometimes been paired with the use of volatile materials and processes like sunlight and bleach to create works that you have little or no control over. I'm interested in the relationship between this relatively structured framework for making work and the unstable materials that you end up working with. Perhaps you could say something about the importance of chance in your work, and how this functions within the space that you create for it?*

Lorna Macintyre: Yes, there's often what I see as an oblique structure behind a work. This can sometimes start with a word or a phrase I've jotted down from something I've been reading. More often, though, the impetus is really several things at the same time; a response to a physical context, a history, a figure or a turn of phrase - a kind of overlapping of elements which starts something. For the solo show at Mary Mary in April, the impetus started with the building the gallery is housed in, which is also where my studio is. It was built as a hotel in the 1850s and, while there's little remaining from this, the reading I did around this area and period, and some of the images and texts I discovered (including a pamphlet called 'Midnight Scenes and Social Photographs' by Shadow), started to become a backdrop for making works for the space.

So while there's a logic to where I'm starting from, in making the work this research often informs my choice of materials or over-arching structures and leaves a lot of room for things to happen of their own accord. I don't necessarily see this structure and use of chance in opposition to each other. The choice of materials I am working with stems so much from this research, that it feels more like a continuation, a way of bringing material into the studio and transforming it into something else, often in the form of allowing a process to take over, for the material to gain a little independence in a way.

KA: *You refer to this research as a backdrop to your work, a word that has both architectural and theatrical connotations. The importance of architecture is evident*

from display mechanisms (such as plinths and shelves) to spatial constructs (many works appear to function as walls, doors and windows). However I wondered whether the theatrical nature of this word, and indeed some of these structures, appealed to you?

LM: Something of the artifice of theatre's structures definitely feels relevant. A lot of work I made when I first graduated used formal architectural devices (compositions of walls, or structures which felt analogous to walls) to make these kind of 'exhibitions within exhibitions', complete with groupings of work which had distinct identities (but were all my own). I'd been reading a lot of postmodernist fiction at the time, and was trying to find a visual language that stemmed from some of the structural tricks within the genre; characters realising they were being written, authors appearing in the pages of their own books as characters - all this boundary crossing between the framework surrounding the work and the world outside it. This whole approach quickly felt formulaic and limiting for me, but something of this interest in the framework surrounding a work and a kind of foregrounding of the structural devices is still a part of my practice. In overtly making the frame, shelf, model or more recently, the plinth an essential component of a work I am also trying to be conscious of this act of display and of this boundary around a work and where it can extend to. I'm also consciously leaving the traces of the process where possible - marks from welding, finger prints, darkroom 'mistakes' have all entered into works, partly as a way of trying to be honest about my own relationship with the materials and the work itself, partly as a way of keeping a sense of the frame as permeable.

KA: *You mentioned previously that you have an interest in the potential to transform or even transcend the materials you work with. This seems to relate to both the symbolic nature of the objects and substances that you use, as well as their physical characteristics. Perhaps you could say something about this?*

LM: There's something fascinating for me in watching liquid become solid as it forms crystals, or in allowing sunlight to complete a chemical transformation in the cyanotype process. I think part of this interest comes from letting go, from allowing things to happen - in creating this possibility for surprise and using structures for indeterminacy to the point that I don't know how something is going to look. It's also been about teasing

MARY MARY



out physical connections between the materials I'm using over several works - showing silver gelatin prints next to sculptural forms with silver crystals grown on them, or more recently using the chemicals I use to make cyanotypes to grow crystals. So the connection between works includes a physicality - and there's a sense of exploring the physical possibilities within a particular material or process. This is less about a scientific type of exploration but more about creating a different level of connection between individual works. So, in using the cyanotype process and chemistry over a series of works, I'm trying to pull out the symbolic associations of the process as well as its physicality.

KA: *A recent work for Mary Mary in Glasgow referenced Apollo (the god of sunlight) and Artemis (the goddess of moonlight), the twinned but opposite deities. The piece consisted of two 'rooms' that mirrored one another, and included a mirror piece that was also used as the negative for a photographic print. Could you say something about the use of mirrors and mirroring in this work?*

LM: These works fit into a larger thread within my practice of creating a kind of abstract portrait. I took a class in Greek Mythology while on exchange a few years ago and learned a lot from the use of objects in relation to a character as a means of identifying one figure from

another but also as a means of telling a story without words. So here the materials themselves are symbolic - the silver in the mirror is a metal associated with the moon and by burning into the silver of the mirror in 'Artemis' I made a large glass negative which I used to make the sunprint in 'Apollo.' So the twinning between these two figures becomes tied to a physical symmetry in the forms and also the symbolic symmetry between sun and moon, male and female... There is a kind of duality I keep on coming back to in the material which interests me - often tied to metaphors around the natural world. In this room the work emphasised the duality of day and night but in other works in the first room, the transition from day to night and time itself was more a point of connection between a larger group of works.

KA: *You mention the use of silver, which is a vital component of mirror, another important material in your work. You've used it for many years and in many different ways, but I wonder if you could say something about mirror's potential as a transformative or transcendent material?*

LM: There's this really instant and powerful symbolism of mirrors - associations with portals, magic, death, psychological development... The way I've incorporated

MARY MARY



Lorna Macintyre
Nocturne, 2012
Bleach etched mirror, spray paint, oak
103 x 20 x 282 cm

them into my work has developed over a few years and a handful of works. In some pieces I made a few years ago it was more as a way of reflecting another, sculpted or ready made object as part of a larger composition. With these works the mirror was as much a device to create this duality with a form – to present this doubling of an object - the real and the reflected, I guess as another way of playing around with this idea of boundaries between the real and the fictive.

More recently I've been using the actual silver of the mirror as a material to transform - burning into it or leaving it exposed to the rain to be dissolved over weeks and months, working with it as a material more than a ready made device, and giving the physical element of silver a more important role. This has also given me a structure for working with chance, leaving the marks created down to the weather or the manner in which chemicals drip, pool or are pushed across it. With both approaches there's also this possibility to bring the viewer and the movement in the space into the reflected image - a constantly shifting, reflected world.

KA: *The work you made recently for St Peters Church in Cambridge comprised a huge mirror that was placed opposite the entrance to the small building, reflecting both the space it was in and the world outside. Its placement suggested an additional exit to the room, whilst the marks across it created a veil over the reality it reflected. Could you say something about the context in which you were working and how the mirror functioned in that space?*

LM: The work evolved as a response to the architecture of the space. In opening up the south facing doors to the church you get this great view back across to Kettle's Yard. So this view back across to the house seemed an important thing to try to pull into the work - a way of remembering the historical connection between the two buildings (the church may not have survived without the care and funds put into it by Jim Ede who created Kettle's Yard) but also working with the axis of the church and the way light comes into it. The church is thought to be on the site of a Roman temple, possibly to Diana (a Roman descendant of Artemis) so the connection between silver and the moon I used in 'Artemis' was developed in a larger scale here. The marks became less controlled - but this connection between the silver of the mirror and the night or the moon became more focal - in opposition to the daylight coming into the church, incidentally giving the work its title, 'Nocturne.'

KA: *I'm interested in this relationship between Greek Mythology and the symbolic use of materials. The idea of transformation seems relevant here too as alchemy (the transmutation of a common substance into one of greater value) is believed to originate from a similar period. Does this ideology and it's more mystical associations have any relevance in your work?*

LM: Well in both Greek Mythology and alchemy there is this rich, structured symbolism around materials which appeals to me; say the laurel wreath as symbolic of Apollo and copper as symbolic of the planet Venus in alchemy. So my interest, especially in alchemy is largely around this symbolic language and in materials

MARY MARY



Lorna Macintyre
Installation view 'Midnight Scenes and Other Works', Mary Mary Glasgow, 2012 (view of Apollo and Artemis)

having significance beyond their own physicality, a way of connecting the sublime and the everyday. There's also a sense of creating a structure for the sublime in alchemy - a kind of ordering of matter which feels relevant for me.

KA: *And what about the connection to mysticism, and the belief in states of consciousness beyond normal human perception? I read somewhere that mythology is considered the precursor to mysticism and that it was only around the late middle ages that the words 'mystic' and 'mystical' developed their negative connotations. I often feel that your work touches on mysticism but seems quite reticent about any deeper associations.*

LM: Well yes I think you are right about a reluctance on my part to pin down a connection to mysticism! As an atheist I think there is so much about mysticism that makes me feel uncomfortable - not least the relationship to organised religion and the muddiness I see

surrounding the words' contemporary use in relation to New Age beliefs. Having said this of course there's a strong connection, I think, with many artists with the idea of mysticism and somehow losing yourself in the process of making work - I like to think of the work taking over, creating its own momentum, somehow taking its own form. For me this is not about any real deity, but maybe there's a sense of the personification of this force, something more akin to Jung's concept of the numinous, something *wholly other*. But this is really an idealised version or something which interests me rather than the reality of what happens in the studio - my practice involves a lot of plodding and mistaking in amongst moments when something more exciting happens.

KA: *I also wanted to ask about how this relates to other artists' work, particularly those that use materials in a symbolic, mythical or mystical way. I keep thinking of Joseph Beuys, whose work is so clearly based on*

MARY MARY



mythology, alchemy and indeed mysticism, and whose use of materials such as gold, honey, beeswax and animals is hugely symbolic.

And at the other end of the spectrum I'm reminded of Carol Bove, who uses various symbolic objects and materials in her work, including gold, peacock feathers and sea shells, and has included various 'mystical' writings and images within her installations, which have even been described as having a 'mystical formalism'.

Would you place your practice between the work of these artists, or are there other influences that are more important to you?

LM: Well Beuys has never been a source of influence for me - in fact I would go so far as to say I find his work problematic. Something pompous, patronising and self-serious has put me off his work from the first encounter although perhaps this is unfair. Maybe

I should look again from a more adult perspective! Bove's work has been much more of an influence on me, for sure - especially a kind of lightness of touch in her incorporation of found material into sculptural works. I think there's clearly a generosity in her practice which seems an antithesis to Beuys and is something I find inspirational - I think she's very good at creating space around her work, allowing things to be themselves...

Overall though it doesn't feel important for me to 'place' my work in relation to that of other artists - and beyond a certain approach or energy or way of using materials I'd say I don't really find direct inspiration in looking at other people's work at the moment - more often just a kind of excitement about making.