

Avy Claire: Marking Time

by Suzette McAvoy

In the winter of 2007, artist Avy Claire began marking time. In the solitude of the studio, with news from public radio playing in the background, she started making marks. Small, methodical marks made with pen and ink in orderly vertical rows, ticking off seconds of time. Progressively the rows formed squares, each square separated from the next by regularly spaced intervals of white. In one work the squares are laid out on a long 25 foot scroll; in another they are centered three to a page on multiple translucent sheets of mylar, each sheet layered one on top another, an accumulation of time that becomes more dense, more impenetrable with each additional layer.

The works are meant to be handled. The scroll slowly unfurled; the sheets passed one over another. To do so, is to handle time. The events of the day—the madness of the war in Iraq, the reports of torture, of environmental destruction, of vapid, engulfing consumerism, of genocide in Somalia, of a tanking economy, of a rudderless government—all the turmoil of the day is embedded here, but made orderly through the hand of the artist. In marking time, in making visible the act of waiting, she ultimately creates a sense of timelessness.

This new work extends an impulse towards mark making that began in Claire's work in 2003-2005 with the *SeaGrass* series. Inspired by a walk on a foggy beach, Claire started to draw lines suggestive of windswept blades of sea grass. She says, "I was working in NYC, and sitting in my studio against the backdrop of the city I started to spend time this way, it was the beginnings of the drawing that came later." Closely related to the *SeaGrass* works, but with a dramatic shift in scale are the *LaForesta* paintings that followed in 2005-2006, in which the artist jumps from "thinking about blades of grass to trunks of trees."

Our human collaboration with nature is at the core of Avy Claire's art. She is intensely interested in delving into this relationship, examining it as an archeologist might from a myriad of viewpoints and across time. "I am drawn to the reassembled landscape, where meaning is re-formed. I play with the tensions of logic and geometry with tendencies of disorder in nature," she says. This is especially apparent in the installations that have become an increasingly important part of her recent work.

Approaching each new installation as a set of variables to be ordered and solved according to the parameters of place, Claire invites the dualities of time and flux to her process. Her ongoing outdoor installation, *Building the Nursery*, begun in summer 2008 during a residency at Waterfall Arts in Montville, Maine, is a case in point. In this work, which involves nurturing existing seedling trees that have sprung up naturally in a part of the woods that had been heavily clear-cut in the past, the process itself is the art piece and is being made visible through strings and stakes. In a few years,

when it is beneficial to do so, the seedling trees will be culled, leaving behind a visible geometry.

Claire's ideas for this work were she says "tempered by the needs of nature." Her original thought was that it would be helpful to remove trees and let the single ones remaining have plenty of room to grow. But she discovered "right now in this stage of growth, it is better to leave them crowded. Nature's nursery is the crowding, the way the trees will 'nurse' each other along, rather than my initial idea of separating them. And digging them up to transplant, in order to alleviate my guilt, or convincing myself that it would be good to give them a life somewhere else, when all that digging in the woods would disrupt the woods floor and hurt the roots of remaining trees."

Acknowledging nature's needs and remaining open to changes wrought by time are fundamental to Claire's art. In her work, *Stone Garden*, created on her own land, the circular composition of stones changes appearance with the seasons, creating a shifting and variable dialogue with its site. Claire says, "This piece has a lot to do with time passing. ... I also thought while building it that I was creating my own archeology. That somehow the visible changes to the lawn would always remain and there would always be a story there, even if someone in the future encountered it without ever knowing exactly what happened, the mystery of that could conjure up a story."

This interface between human culture and nature is explored further in the recent work on mylar, collectively titled *Pages*. In these works, digital images of calligraphic handwriting and plant forms are layered and superimposed in a manner suggestive of multiple screens open simultaneously on a computer, provoking thought on how we communicate and interpret information in an age of virtual reality. Handwriting, once a primary form of communication, is here unintelligible, a visual remnant of a past time. The challenging coexistence of nature, technology and humans is harmoniously brought into close juxtaposition by the artist.

"Art is not a question of taste, it is a question of proving what is real," is a quote that Claire has had pinned to her studio wall for some years, along with "Painting is not any one particular story but the place where all stories happen." Questioning for the "real," engaging the senses, allowing the stories to be revealed, is Claire's approach to art making. She says:

I have come to realize that I'm a project person. I get interested in something, realize it to some degree and depending on where it leads me, I can jump into another project or not. However, I do revisit ideas that get incorporated into subsequent projects; I tend not to have a visually linear chronology. Lately, I feel that my medium will be whatever it takes to accomplish what I want to do. That said, I tend to work within a limited palette of tools — painting, drawing, printing digital imagery, mylar.

In her installation, *For the Trees*, exhibited in the summer of 2008 at the Belfast, Maine annex of Waterfall Arts, she employed this “palette of tools” to create a metaphorical forest uniting and addressing many of her current interests. The eight “trees” composing the “forest” are large-scale drawings on clear mylar sheets, over six feet high and nearly three feet wide, each suspended from the ceiling within a space of about 20 x 10 feet. The drawings were hung at slightly varying angles and at enough distance apart for a person to walk between them.

As the viewer approached the installation, the transparency of the mylar sheets allowed multiple trees to be viewed at once, intensifying the sensation of a forest setting. The spacing of the trees invited the viewer to engage physically within the drawings. To do so brought the reward of seeing that, in fact, each tree was composed of line after line of tiny handwriting, in which single words, phrases, and fragments of sentences were decipherable. Sustained viewing, and reading, revealed that the artist was transcribing streams of words from contemporary news events. Like her earlier mark making works, *For the Trees*, embodies time and transcends it. Our human activity both informs nature and is subsumed by it. The trees tell our stories and are shaped by them. Our interdependence with nature is made clear. This is art that proves “what is real.”

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