Flux: Elements of a Floating World

ISOBEL CLEMENT

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Pitspace Gallery, Level 2, Ross Building, RMIT Bundoora West Campus, Plenty Road, Bundoora
Flux: Elements of a Floating World

This installation by Isobel Clement represents a dialogue between opposite parts of self: the part that wishes to float and the part that wishes to be anchored, to reason and intuit, to limit and expand... She works hard to challenge, appease and inform herself and these seemingly opposing needs. Everything - body, mind, emotions, ideas etc are constantly in a state of flux, nothing is really fixed or permanent but always changing from one state to another.

Isobel has recognized the need to allow this process of change in her work. Life as a process of change, as a state of flux; observing and reporting on these stages of transition. In this way, this state of flux becomes the subject of one's struggle. On the surface, the unifying theme in this installation is the relatively simple motif of a ship. This motif provides a sense of continuity and familiarity, but other things are happening here; the work and its meaning is multi-layered.

The installation is presented in two parts and both share the common title, Flux: Elements of a Floating World.

Some of the ideas and issues that Isobel has been working with for a couple of years and which reach a conclusion in the first part of this installation make reference to a number of artists ideas including those of Robert Ryman, Philip Guston, Jasper Johns and John Cage. However, it is Jasper Johns and John Cage in particular that have provided a conceptual framework for her work. For example, she has found a certain liberation in the John Cage Zen Buddhist inspired idea that through a repetitious performance of an action eventually there can be a creative or illuminating breakthrough. Put another way, if you find something that you're doing is difficult or boring, do it again and again, keep repeating it until the resistance breaks down and something even interesting happens and it's no longer boring. Something creative has replaced the mechanical repetitious process. Cage also suggested that nothing is either inherently good or bad, beautiful or ugly and as a consequence anything, any subject or object is a valid starting point for one's work.

Jasper Johns, a close friend of Cage also shared similar ideas. Johns cultivated the arbitrary and the impersonal in his work. He attempted to consciously minimize any personal autobiographical reference. In his drawings and paintings he explores and exploits simple images, objects and motifs of a mundane and perhaps even banal nature - the Duchampian idea of the found image or the ready-made. Johns said, 'I used things the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels.'

Flux: Elements of a Floating World #1

This work is basically monochromatic and made up of over 30 cardboard panels, and is painted in oil. The repeated ship motif is not hand-painted, instead it is hand-pressed i.e. made with a clay stamp. The soft clay is extruded through a ship shaped cardboard stencil, paint is applied and then the clay-stamp is pressed against the cardboard leaving an impression of the ship. Because the clay is soft it prints unevenly and loses its definition after several impressions. The clay ship shape is then reformed and re-coated with paint and again applied to the cardboard surface. This process is repeated over and over again.

According to Isobel the ship motif was an arbitrary choice. It held no personal or special significance for her, she could just as easily have chosen something else, although in retrospect she now finds this hard to imagine given the symbolic meaning that this image has come to represent and the way that it has infiltrated her artistic work. Yet at the time she saw it simply as a neutral image, something that the mind already knows. The ship image here represents a sign, a form which is or can be infinitely repeated and the repetition of which builds a new pattern which is to say another reading. So what starts out as one thing can become through repetition many things, other things, something else, something altogether different from its initial starting point.

So having arbitrarily chosen the ship motif Isobel set about using it, repeating its familiar shape again and again. At first the process seemed somewhat robotic and the hand as an extension of this mechanical uttering seemed also to be performing a narrow range of painterly actions. She imagined, that by adopting this process she might achieve a kind of cool objective expression, partly mechanical and partly hand-made. A tougher pictorial language that made no obvious or conscious reference to her subjective nature. However, the excitement and vulnerability of the hand and its intuitive searching of things is still evident, these qualities have not been submerged.

The gestural language in her painting is emotionally charged, even though the image tries hard to contradict it. The cool impersonal approach, after much repetition has the capacity to heat up and this heat confounds and contradicts its austere beginning.

Individually there are simple ship motifs but collectively there is a more complex meaning - something more imaginative and oblique. The visual patterns seem to take on qualities which tend to puzzle and perhaps even disturb.
In the course of this work Isobel has come to realize that the things she was trying to deny and avoid, i.e. her emotional nature and intuitive responses, were the very things she needed to work with. She recognizes the need to discover her own inner space which is the source of creativity and which brings a certain unpredictability and richness to artistic experience. She doesn't want to block out this inner space or source. She wants to journey into it but not with a failure of nerve - she wants it to accommodate her psychological experience in all its forms.

Ships by design have solitary natures; they’re restless and searching. They can’t be moored in one place for too long. The longer they remain still the more quickly they rust. A ship represents no secure base; it is a solid and heavy thing and yet it floats; it moves from point to point upon water but there’s no real security in its movement. A place upon water lacks definition and difference, it dissolves into all other watery places.

Being on a ship is surreal, a strangely disembodied feeling that only the experience of being contained between infinite sky and water gives you. Here, you can become lost and disoriented in both tranquil and appalling weather - a safe harbour is just a memory. In the back of your mind there’s the fear of sinking, of being swept overboard and you keep imagining stories of shipwrecks. But for now you’re still the survivor shaping your sensations and recollections. A ship makes you think of a time when ships quietly dropped their moorings and headed out to sea to the sound of iron cutting water and the sounds of separation. A ship floats between old and new worlds, in an open sea where there is an equal measure of despondency and exhilaration. Ships remind you of foreigners and foreign places and the incantations of their unfamiliar languages. The migrants who voyage across unknown waters dreaming of a better life; another life. Dreamers who migrate alone, sometimes agitated, sometimes tranquil on a wilderness of sea. You find yourself on deck still restlessly observing the horizon and asking yourself questions about the unknown. You might judge the water to be shallow or deep but you’re uncertain, you can’t trust what your eyes and senses tell you, but you have to make certain decisions anyway. The element of water is a seamless plane and just like the sky it ‘supports’ you even though you doubt and fear it.

Now and then the solidity of land comes into view and then it disappears again. You wonder where you are and where you’re going. The doubt comes from the tension between the part that wishes to be anchored and the part that wishes to float.

Flux: Elements of a Floating World #2

This is a group of seven paintings, also oil on cardboard, which were inspired by a tourist’s photograph of the port city of Vladivostok. The photograph shows a panoramic view on a cold and grey winter’s day. It is taken from a high vantage point looking down at the sprawling city, with the harbour beyond and the mountains in the far distance.

This watercourse upon which many ships float is also a place of flux and change, where fresh water mingles with salt water, where the push and pull of tides and currents create marine patterns of transient beauty.

The photographer is a friend of Isobel’s. It was simply a snap-shot recorded during her travels through Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Who knows what the friend thought and felt before and after she took the photograph. Her perception is recorded but unknown to us. In a moment reality is rearranged. In a moment everything is silenced. In a moment the camera is set in place, the scene focussed and the picture taken.

But where is the truth? The image has become a captive, but unaware of its captivity; it appears to harbour mixed feelings as well as mystery.

What is interesting, is that for some reason Isobel made a strong connection with this image. It meant something to her - their destinies crossed and this contact caused an effect. But why this photograph? Isobel has speculated that it might have something to do with the narrative element; the exotic and romantic allure of travelling in distant lands. The mixed and complex feelings of journeying, loss, leaving, apprehension, anticipation and arrival...

She was certainly drawn to the images of ships and boats in this photograph; all of them in various stages of deterioration. Perhaps there is also something intriguing about appropriating and working with a photographic image that someone else has taken and which is tinged with their experience. And then too, there’s the sense that she is taking a metaphorical journey by way of a friend’s actual journey.

I don’t pretend to know or understand the story and the dialogue between Isobel’s and the photograph’s world, but I sense the impulses and emotions like flashing patterns and rhythms branching out in many directions. This photograph is a reminder that there is a close relationship between her real life and her fictional and imaginative life. She is the story teller and the reader of stories whose breath warms up its frozen world.

If the work in the first part of this installation deals with the known, this part delves into the unknown. Perhaps it’s an exaggeration to say that this photograph has irreversibly altered her viewpoint, but it has become part of her nature. She has transferred something of herself to this place, emptied part of her soul into its dimension.
In a way this simple photograph has been a catalyst for change, or at least because of it she has permitted herself different kinds of thoughts and emotional experiences; because of it she has been willing to change her mind.

There is a sensuous, lyrical and airy quality in these recent paintings. There is also a telling use of colour; from the first in the group which explores black and white and an extended scale of greys, to the fully saturated colour palette of the third painting and finally the seventh painting which is primarily black and white. As the series progressed the colours changed and the images became more linear. Isobel says that what caused these changes was an impulsive rather than a predetermined thing. As she became more familiar with the photographic image she felt able to put more of herself into each painting. Progressively, she found a way of warming up its cold and colourless world. Her interpretations no longer have the frozen air of Vladivostok in winter. Somehow she has by-passed the sense of melancholy and panic that some experience in the face of limitless cold and limitless greyness.

It has become somewhat clichéd though no less true to say that artist's are involved in a journey of some kind in which they become obsessed with contacting that illusive aspect of their nature. Just what and where this aspect is to be found is unclear, it constantly shifts position and takes on a new camouflage; the closer we get to it the more sophisticated and subtle the camouflage becomes.

Let me go back to the photograph. I'm still wondering what Isobel sees in it but I don't know what she's thinking. I could imagine for instance that this image represents the most extreme place, the furthest destination of a journey that she has never taken and perhaps never will. It is a destination in her mind, a place she simultaneously fears and loves. The mind is drawn into its artificial world, the impression is familiar involving long lost memories streaked by intervals of dark and light. She and this place share qualities that only they can identify. There's an opening between them from where the dank smell of seaweed floats in the air and in the distance the distance fades.

One can become lost in the image of a photograph, mesmerized by the chemical effects and the illusion of infinite space which releases its grainy tonal information very slowly. How do you make sense of the illusionistic data that tends more and more toward ambiguity and complexity?

This is what Isobel finds intriguing and the fact that a machine 'generated' this picture, albeit a handheld machine. A machine that sees and registers such detail that it's impossible to assimilate unless one enters willingly into its vast sensitized dimension.

This is a real photograph of real objects, of things as they once were: the glint of sunlight on steel, reflections on glass and water, the texture of sky and distance, the quality of atmosphere... A solemn scene of a south eastern Russian winter defined by a geometry of cubes and rooftops and in the harbour a static montage of ships and boats.

There is a melancholy presence here and its not just the greyness and the absence of human life; its a place where light-heartedness and frivolity seem to be forbidden. It seems that here light moods and light colours would be routinely trampled on and discarded.

I can't help speculating on the fate of this place and the unseen humanity that hides within it. But these speculations are illusory, just as illusory as the photograph itself; a chemical recording on paper and yet this 'illusion' can be seen, reinvented and reinterpreted endlessly. Its artificial world is transformed by mind-heart-hand re-creation. Each painted picture becomes a movement and moment in history that finds itself pictorially born to be observed and experienced.

Isobel has immortalized or rather, mortalized the work of this photographer whose contribution was altogether different.

One is always just on the verge of making an essential breakthrough but change intervenes; change which sometimes brings sudden revelations, sails close to the edge of things making both harmonious and discordant patterns.

The process of making art is an endless series of negotiations and strategies - its content revolves around thoughts, sensations, influences... things constantly in flux; the elements of a floating world and our attempts to discriminate and adjust in relation to them.

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