

Rebecca O' Dwyer's Blog

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This must be The Place: Mikala Dwyer's 'Panto Collapsar'

By rebeccaodwyer February 15, 2012

The work of Mikala Dwyer is of specific interest to me: having just recently commenced research around the figure of transcendentalism in contemporary art, her work does appear as representative of a particular tendency, which seems not unwilling to broach art as something itself beyond representation. Here, the art object, though fully of this world, at the same time pointedly alludes to something beyond the material form it inhabits.

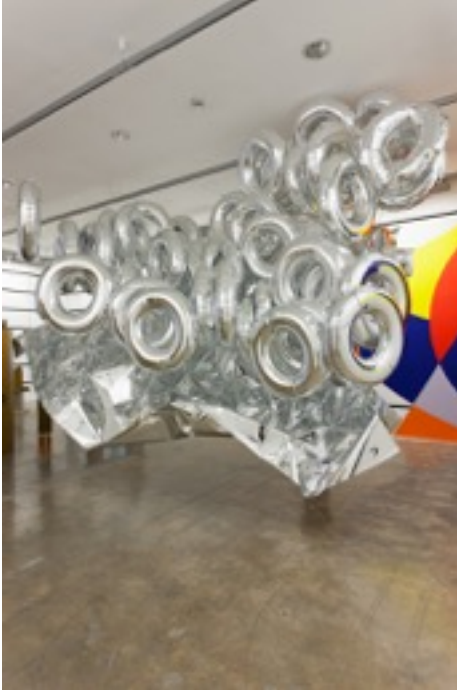


Mikala Dwyer "Panto Collapsar" (2012), Exhibition view showing 'The Additions and Subtractions' (2012)

The circle assumes a central role in the exhibition, as it has through much of Dwyer's recent work, and this for the most part is what gives it an otherworldly or mystical feel: the circle is the void, a cite of incantation or prayer; something, but at the same time nothing; full, and yet paradoxically empty. Here, it takes the form of what might be described as a wholly contemporary Stonehenge or fairy-fort, *The Additions and Subtractions* (2012). A formation of hastily painted plinths, in cheap and streaky shades of bronze and silver, occupies a portion of the gallery space, and this circular motif reverberates throughout the exhibition.

Dwyer has stated an interest in such spaces as a site of activation, a means of modifying behaviour – possibly towards transgression – and as such might act as a departure point into the unknown[i].

Her circles, however, are of the ‘known-unknown’ kind: detritus of the everyday, married with roughly constructed clay forms and semi-precious stones, form the basis on which this symbolism rests. And yet, these barely-made forms take on an importance that transcends their making as they come to rest atop these plinths. A strangely animalistic tendency can be witnessed also, as a series of three Bushmills whiskey bottles, holding a liquid that at least still resembles whiskey, are extended vertically by the addition of clay antler-like protrusions. Elsewhere, another form strongly echoes the talismanic appearance of animal horns. This circle, then, appears to coalesce the made with what I will call the unmade, or natural: if Dwyer wants to create the conditions of incantation, presumably the unmade – say, an *actual* pair of antlers – would further explicate her aim? Instead, Dwyer creates an object to allude to such a form. This interests me; firstly, by consideration of it as a deliberate move away from the readymade; and secondly, by virtue of the fact that these objects do indeed fulfil the role that the unmade ‘readymade’ would ordinarily do. Therefore, the art-object, in such a treatment, is signified quite deliberately as a bone, in so doing assuming a set of specifically mystical or transcendental allusions. This is an approach that can be seen throughout the show, with a desire that transforms the work into more-or-other-than the sum of its parts. As such, the works are transformed from inert and contingent matter into animistic sites of (possible) revelation.



Mikala Dwyer, 'Panto Collapsar', exhibition view showing 'The Silvering' (2012). This circle forms only one part of the exhibition, but its resonance is echoed throughout. Another work, *The Silvering* (2012), also uses it as a central motif, but here they are floating above us, as a crowd of silver balloon forms (perhaps the circle's paradoxical nature most fitting articulation). These suspended forms in turn are bound to a silvery mass of crumpled sheeting, which lies beneath as though in barely-acceptant recognition of the demands of gravity. On apprehending these forms from behind, the wall painting is reflected onto the sheeting's underside, giving rise to paradoxical shades of blues, yellows and oranges. Cited with regard to this work is the Maori myth of creation; this recounts the sky father and earth mother's embrace in a primordial nothingness (Te Kore), in darkness giving rise to offspring. These offspring thereafter enacted the irredeemable separation of sky and earth, heralding in light, and thus creation. In *The Silvering*, this moment is captured ambiguously; indeed, the pair could as easily be deemed in the moment of reunification. Thus, the moment of creation is at the same time equated with its underside i.e. negation^[ii]. The use of the word 'Collapsar' here makes sense; Collapsar is the term used to describe the movement of a collapsed-star into a black hole – a site of non-knowledge or nothingness, but not necessarily nothing-at-all: It may simply signify another, divergent form of creation. Adjacent to this piece, as though almost beholding the scene at a distance, are the four figures of *The Collapzars*, (2012). It is difficult not to anthropomorphise their languid forms – misshapen heads with holes in; lengths of tatty fabric to signify the humanity they've held onto. These might be the children of the aforementioned myth, surveying the fruits of their trade-off for light, or simply the base materiality that springs forth in its wake: it is difficult, if not impossible to know.



Mikala Dwyer 'Panto Collapsar', exhibition view showing 'The Collapzars' (2012). Within *Panto Collapsar*, as with other works, Dwyer attempts to create the site as one pregnant with a meaning that may or may not happen; the circle, static and ritualistic, or floating above us, proves the driving force behind this ambiguous logic. What is enacted is the desire to flatten the objects towards their base materiality, devoid of 'higher' or unnecessary signification. In this way the objects can be reformed in the viewer's mind, emptied out in the interests of an altering of behaviour or thought. In this way, they might carve a sacred space and validate their material or formal existence in and of-themselves. It is worth quoting here some thoughts from Slavoj Žižek, who, differentiating the role that contemporary art fulfils in contrast with pre-modern works, says this:

[O]ne can no longer count on the Void of the (Sacred) Place being there, offering itself to be occupied by human artefacts, so the task is to sustain the Place as

such, to make sure that this Place itself will 'take place' – in other words, the problem is no longer that of the horror vacui, of filling in the Void, but, rather, that of creating the Void in the first place^[iii].

Pre-modern art was predicated on an anxiety as to the *quality* of the work, as to whether it was fit to be seen within the context of this Void, which gives meaning by operating anterior *to*, and in excess of, meaning. Now, Zizek says, contemporary art must sustain the fiction of a 'something-else', of a space towards which the artwork strives. Dwyer's work self-consciously nods to this sentiment: wryly ambiguous, her circle is both empty *and* full.

[i] You can hear the artist talking about this aspect of her work [here](#), with regard to her contribution to the 2010 Sydney Biennale.

[ii] The Sky Father and Earth Mother of course are preeminent in many myths of creation. By allusion, the dominance of the Sky Father, and subjugation of the Earth Mother, has come to refer in gendered terms to the rise of patriarchal society. Thus, at least from a feminist point of view, this moment of creation could indeed be interpreted in a negative light, or at least one that might be understood in a paradoxical light.

[iii] Slavoj Zizek *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London & New York: Verso, 2000) Pg. 27