

Maxine Bristow: 'Sustaining 7 Square Metres'

Catalogue essay in *Revealed*, published to coincide with the exhibition 'Reveal' at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, 17.09.05 – 27.11.05

Produced in 1999 *Sustaining 7 Square Metres* is one of a series of what have since become my signatory 'bag' forms. This body of work begun in 1996, uses the materials and processes of plain-sewing within the conventions of a minimalist aesthetic. It acknowledges the traditions and discursive contexts of both these codes of practice, but through a process of exchange aims to transcend their commonly accepted definitions of meaning.

The bag form was initially prompted by *Untitled (Clothespin Piece) 1968* a small 'sleeve-like' piece by Eva Hesse, and was the outcome of a period of enquiry where I was trying to find a suitable vehicle for the gesso encrusted, quilted, seamed and buttonholed surfaces that I had been producing. Excited by the sensuality and tactility of these surfaces, what I was looking for was a suitably neutral form that would provide me with a significant surface area, and whilst having an affective material presence, would not itself detract from the surface interest. What I wanted was something with a object-like quality that would reference textile's own history and significance within material culture.

The bag form in many ways seemed a perfect solution. In its frontality and simplicity of shape it allowed attention to focus on the sensuous quality of surface; but having a back and interior space was also very much an object with references to familiar domestic artefacts, connotations of utility, and importantly, the associated characteristics of touch, intimacy and accessibility. What was also interesting was the way that the bags, both in their shape and frontality (with all their references to the repetitive, self-effacing industry epitomised in what is often called 'women's work' marginalised within the history of art), audaciously occupied the same space of painting and clearly began to reference what Robert Hughes described as 'the seriality, repetition and exalted emotional silence that was the mark of a certain phase of American modernism'.¹

The early bag forms were very much intuitive responses and the period since 1996 to the present has been concerned with refining my visual language and understanding the implications of my actions. Research and reflection on the outcomes of making has allowed me to understand the emerging conceptual concerns of the work and the critical contexts in which it is positioned.

Making and remaking within a limited format provided a constant through which to variously focus on such formal and aesthetic considerations as the quality of material/surface, process/technique, figure/ground relationships, shape, scale and tonality. As a signatory motif, the bound buttonhole has acted both as an incident within surface (*3x19 Intersecting a Seam*); has repetitively mapped and measured the surface (*Square Correlation No.'s 1-5* and *1,326 Grey on Grey*); and obsessively repeated to the point where the ground fabric has been almost entirely cut away, has itself

simultaneously constituted both surface and ground (*1,452 Not Motive but Ground*). Pushed to the edge it has acted as a framing device drawing attention to the surface (*Buttoned Through: 6 rows of 16 and 156 Down 6 Side Seams*), and in *Sustaining 7 Square Metres* it is eliminated altogether.

In their shape, scale, and modular configuration, the bags themselves have explored similar formal relationships, and as a consequence have helped me to gain a clearer understanding of the key motivations and preoccupations within my work. Beginning as singular forms, the bags increased both in size and in number of module units (initially from one to three) with the intention of achieving a larger surface area and thereby more pronounced material presence. However, as the size increased a key challenge was how to maintain an insistence on the surface over a larger area. In *Sustaining 7 Square Metres* the bag forms reached their maximum size. Concerned that they might become too monumental and lose their important relationship to the body and conscious of the difficulties of sustaining the surface over a larger scale, I began in subsequent series, rather than increase the size, to explore the possibilities of much larger multiples. This change of approach instigated by *Sustaining 7 Square Metres* prompted a subsequent shift in focus from inner to external relationships, as the work's engagement with both the space of the gallery and the body of the viewer began to be articulated in a much more pronounced way. As Lucy Lippard suggests in her essay *The Silent Art*:

When the expanse of an uninflected single surface gives way to the silhouette, the wall becomes the ground, or field, and the canvas itself becomes an image, a three dimensional version of the hard-edge painted image.²

Whilst critical issues raised by the textile materials and processes employed in the production of the bag forms have provided a significant point of reference, a useful critical framework for reflecting on the development of the work and its emerging contextual concerns, has also been provided by many of the debates surrounding painting and sculpture in the 1960's, espoused in the writings of such critics as Greenberg, Fried, Judd, Morris, Lippard. Though not consciously dictating my actions at the time, issues arising out of the various manifestations of monochrome painting, the boundaries between painting and sculpture, and critiques of minimalist sculpture, have helped me to understand the implication of my actions.

In their tension between a preoccupation with surface and space, the bag forms seem to have resonances with many of the concerns *in the sixties, when non-illusionism and matter-of-fact objectness occupied the minds of artists and critics.*³ As Colpitt suggest in her discussion of Monochrome Painting: *It is a tenuous position to maintain: the insistence on surface while denying the three-dimensional object-nature of the support.*⁴ The bag forms adopt many of the strategies employed by artists during this period. They consciously make reference to the simple geometric form, serial repetition and modular configuration that was a specific concern of Minimalism. The aim, through such procedures is to deny subjective engagement; yet crucially, the work departs from Minimalist concerns as any attempt at rational coherence and objective detachment is continually

disrupted by the somatic sensuality of cloth and by the social and historical connotations of the needlework techniques employed in its production.

I clearly recall what prompted the making of *Sustaining 7 Square Metres*: one lunchtime in the interior design shop where I order many of my materials, I came across an incredibly expensive felted wool fabric, and oblivious of the cost felt was compelled to purchase a couple of metres. Upon returning to College to show my colleagues my new purchase, I was in a state of rapturous delight. With the fabric wrapped around my body, stroking, licking my lips and murmuring with pleasure, I was struck by what seemed to be a dissolving of the boundary between subject object and the way that the fabric was able to elicit such a bodily response and profound affect. Having always aimed to provoke such a response within my own stitched and gesso encrusted surfaces, here was a fabric that did it without any intervention on my part!

Providing the stimulus for a new body of work, my intention was to see whether this felted wool could sustain the surface of a new large-scale set of bags without the reliance on the buttonhole motif. In the potency of its material, the resulting *Sustaining 7 Square Metres* would seem to move beyond formalist interpretation requiring what Simon Morley describes in his article *The Sublime and the Beautiful* as 'interpretation that engages with basic phenomenological and psychological issues'.⁵ Within *The Sublime and the Beautiful* and *Light as Surface*⁶ Simon Morley offers alternative theoretical perspectives on work that 'juxtapose(s) the *optical* - the visual field experienced as a luminous cloud-like space with the *tactile* - the material fact of the object registered through surface texture and geometry'.⁷ Though his articles focus on painting, the theoretical perspectives that he puts forward seem to have particular resonance with the interests of my own work. Morley suggests: 'in relation to aesthetic theory, the dialectic between form and formlessness mirrors the fundamental categories of the Sublime and the Beautiful'⁸ as articulated by Lyotard. In relation to psychoanalytical theory, Morley proposes that Lyotard's notion of the sublime also finds correlations are with Kristeva's analysis of 'the relationship between the pre-linguistic or 'semiotic' state of infancy and symbolic language which provides the key to the subversive potential of the aesthetic'.⁹

Kristeva suggests that it is through art that we can recover a former relation to the semiotic: 'traces of a marginal experience, through and across which a maternal body might recognise its own otherwise inexpressible in our culture'¹⁰... Such marginal experience is made present, 'at the intersection of sign and rhythm, of representation and light, the semiotic and the symbolic' (Kristeva 1980, p.242)¹¹

A useful reflective framework has similarly been provided by issues surrounding contemporary women artists who 'explore different potentialities for painting outside the modernist paradigm of purity, unity and disembodiment of vision'.¹² In her essay *Threads*, Rosa Lee 'tracks the limits of vision in painting' and 'identifies characteristics that exceed the purely visual and relate to somatic senses of touch, rhythm and gesture, as well as different kinds of vision'.¹³

As with the artists that Lee discusses,¹⁴ my own work clearly acknowledges the importance of the body in aesthetic experience. The surfaces of the bags are literally activated by touch as the gesso encrusted cloth is made pliable by working over the surface inch by inch, and repetitive bodily performance is re-enacted through the hand turning of buttonholes, row upon row of quilting and the gentle rhythms of running stitch.

What was significant about *Sustaining 7 Square Metres* was that it did make me realise that similar to the artists that Morley discusses in *The Sublime and the Beautiful* and *Light as Surface*, what was important with my own work was the juxtaposition of luminosity and sensuality (created through the striated material surfaces) and the laborious, rational, repetitive processes of making. It was this observation that prompted me to make my own equivalent of the felted wool through the use of canvas work/needlepoint that I have subsequently adopted in more recent work. With the needlepoint, the dense accumulation of stitches worked on the grid of even-weave canvas creates a more striated quality and the embodied accrual of the material surface (that was perhaps missing in the shop bought cloth of *Sustaining 7 Square Metres*) becomes all the more pronounced. The only problem with the needlepoint is that it takes an hour to stitch one square inch!

References

1. Hughes, R. (1994) *Amish, The Art of the Quilt*. London: Phaidon Press, p.14
2. Lippard, L.R. (2002) 'The Silent Art' in Colpitt, F. (ed) *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.58
3. Colpitt, F. (1997) 'Monochrome Painting' in *Minimal Art The Critical Perspective*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, p.30
4. Ibid., p.32
5. Morley, S. *The Sublime and the Beautiful*, Art Monthly 6.96/197, p14
6. Morley, S. *The Sublime and the Beautiful*, Art Monthly 6.96/197; *Light as Surface*, Contemporary Visual Arts, issue 15
7. Morley, S *The Sublime and the Beautiful*, Art Monthly 6.96/197, p16
8. Ibid., p.15
9. Betterton, R (1996) 'Bodies in the Work the Aesthetics and Politics of Women's Non Representational Painting' in *An Intimate Distance Women, Artists and the Body*. London: Routledge.
10. Kristeva, J. (1980) *Desire in Language A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Oxford: Blackwell, p243.
11. Ibid., p.242
12. Betterton, R (ed) (2004) *Unframed Practices and Politics of Women's Contemporary Painting*, London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, p.2. (See also: Deepwell, K, (1994) 'Paint-Stripping' *Women's Art Magazine*, 58 pp14-16)

13.Ibid, p. 6

14.Rosa Lee, 'Threads: Dialogues with Jo Bruton, Beth Harland, Nicky May and Katie Pratt' in Betterton, R. (ed) *Unframed Practices and Politics of Women's Contemporary Painting*, I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2004.