



Cherry Smyth June 2016

Helen Mirra and Allyson Strafella: Suchness

Large Glass London 15 April to 24 June

There is a quietness that rests easily between two people whose thoughts are so aligned that silence seems to speak. This delicate, sparse show emerges from that still pool of correspondence between two artists via conversations and artwork from a shared aesthetic and spirituality. Allyson Strafella uses a customised typewriter to make dense repetitions on paper, while in her abstract tapestries Helen Mirra draws with wool on linen. The show's title, 'Suchness', is taken from one of the key words in Buddhist philosophy, *tathata*, the Sanskrit term for 'thusness', the thing in itself when it has been stripped of the linguistic, cultural and social meanings we impose on it. As Stephen Bachelor, former monk and secular Buddhist, explained in a talk to open the show, if the mind is still, we can discern this 'unpindownable' quality in things and in ourselves.

There is everything Buddhist and at the same time nothing Buddhist about this exhibition. It sits firmly within a minimalist lineage with nods to artists like Richard Tuttle and others. The sensibility evokes a provisional lightness and spaciousness, despite the fact that Strafella's work is made from metal stamps

repeatedly hitting paper, and most of the work is under A4 in size. Some of Mirra's work resembles hanging scrolls, such as those used in sacred rituals: the linen is hung from concealed magnets and designed to be folded up and transported elsewhere like a Tibetan *tanka*. A mood of transience is also conveyed by Strafella's unframed, extremely fragile, perforated drawings whose lace-like surfaces succumb to air like prayer flags fraying into weather. But the liminal drawings could as easily invoke the microscripts left by Swiss writer Robert Walser, who wrote in diminutive handwriting on paper printed for another use. Walser's method circumvented writer's block which also brought Strafella to a radically altered way of 'writing': she struck the dash key in blank frustration until she had constructed a grid and found a path to a new language.

While Mirra and Strafella share a distilled methodology, there are also moments of confluence in the works themselves. Strafella's *Berth*, 2003, in which a fragmented blue arch sits crookedly at the edge of pale paper, is echoed in Mirra's piece entitled *Unbleached handspun, dark blue*, 2015, where the darker gap under a paler arch takes prominence. Is the sky holding up the arch or the other way around? We cannot have a thought without a thinker and both drawings suggest the interconnectedness at the moment when a thought is noticed and the mind knows itself.

It is harder at first to see the connections between, say, Mirra's compelling monochrome *Undyed ecru, undyed blacks*, 2015, and *Articulation*, 2015, by Strafella, positioned next to it, but further research reveals that *Articulation* revisits the motifs in *Sky-wrecks*, 2002, in which Mirra devised a floor sculpture in blue cloth triangles to plot the geodesic form of the sky. But the 'sky' in Strafella's work is a ragged London grey, the thousands of pitted marks giving the darker grey Japanese gampi paper the texture of hessian. Here the surface seems interwoven like

fabric, playing back a harmony to Mirra's tapestries.

Both artists excel in creating depth and presence with very few means. In a small tapestry called *Light silver, medium green*, 2015, Mirra weaves a vertical tower of green wool with seven 'gaps' on one side and a column of seven 'windows' on the other as if they belonged together. The design evokes a filmstrip but could also suggest the advice to those who sit in meditation to let the spine rise like a column of gold coins. Scale also works to great effect in Strafella's drawing *Pulled Corner*, 2007, which recalls the intricacy of a Vija Celmins night constellation. Here, the surface of the matt black paper is hammered into a subtle manila brown shade, the corner of the drawing veering up and away as if the paper ground itself is being stretched. This quality of animated ephemerality renders the small drawing astoundingly powerful.

In both artists' work there is a palpable tension between purpose and aimlessness, between precision and chance, and between what is hidden and what is open to interpretation and immanence. Both explore how thinking can bypass language and communicate its fleetingness in material form. Their correspondence recalls a short poem by Paul Celan: 'Adumbrated, again, your words succeed to the beech's foreshadowed/ leaf-sprig.// There is/ none of you comes across,/ you hold a strangeness in fee.// Endless,/ I hear the stone in you stand.' ■

CHERRY SMYTH is an art writer, poet and curator.

Helen Mirra
*Undyed ecru, undyed
blacks* 2015

