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JOE SHEEHAN

Surface Tension

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The library of repurposed and archipelagic time

Gregory O'Brien

'If the tides are our twice-daily connection to the universe, the rocks are our ever-present library of time.' (Adam Nicholson).

'…a floating/sinking kind of thing, disastrous and beautiful…' (Joe Sheehan)

Oceanography of the gallery floor

The harbour on a windless day, a polished gallery floor… Approaching Joe Sheehan's 'Surface Tension' at Tim Melville Gallery, the view into the exhibition space, as you ascend the ramp, resembles the kind of coastal surveys made by shipborne artists during the Age of Exploration and thereafter. Like those early drawings—which set about rendering each headland, bluff and outcrop along a horizontal axis—Joe's cut/carved/sandblasted forms extend upwards like miniature rock formations from the gallery floor.

In keeping with the coastal surveys of old, Joe's artistic project is at once a process of discovery and revelation. Unlike its historical precedent, however, his art aims to set forms and meanings in motion, to render them unstable, rather than lay down any fixed or 'accurate' co-ordinates. 'I was really interested,' he writes, 'in the way in which I could use the floor to put the viewer "at sea", so to speak, in relation to the objects.'

As the viewer moves into the gallery space, the perspective becomes the downward gaze of a beachcomber or hovering bird, and the work comes to resemble a rock-strewn plain or beach; an archipelago or reef seen from above. Closer still, it becomes apparent that Joe Sheehan's 'islands', carved in stone, are modelled on flagons, canisters, bottles and other accoutrements of early 21st century life—the kind of mass-produced items once described as 'disposable' before we realised it was never that simple.

Angular cuts through the stone determine the slant on which these shapes sit on the floor. Lopsided, bobbing about, seemingly random in their arrangement, these visible forms are just 'the tip of the iceberg'–a suggestion of a larger reality beneath/beyond. Joe likes 'the way the cut pieces make the brain fill in the blank which (hopefully) makes the whole environment one big sculptural moment.'

A slow space

'The sea is not made of water,' writes Adam Nicholson. The ocean is *made up of stuff*. Myriad life-forms, for a start. But there is also much that arrives from elsewhere—for better or worse: plastics, bottles, flotsam and jetsam. With its geological/archaeological freight onboard, Joe Sheehan's room-sized installation becomes, in his own terminology, 'a pool of reflection… a slow space… beautiful, geological nodes, low on the floor...' While his work inadvertently casts a sideways glance at current environmental and geopolitical issues, he doesn't allow that narrative to become an overbearing one. He wants the work to speak across different realms of being and feeling, across different cultural frameworks, and to move backwards and forwards in time. Poetic rather than didactic, these works are paradoxical and contrary in nature:

Floating – Sinking

Solid - Fluid

Stable - Unstable

Permanent - Temporary

Ancient - New

Useful - Useless

Natural (geological) - Factory-made

Precious - Worthless

Beyond their referents in the 'disposable' commercial culture, Joe's sculpted subjects attain an unexpected quasi-mythical dimension. Having emerged from the underworld of human society, his subjects are transformed, like the tragic figure of Eurydice in Greek myth, into stone. The main difference is that, in the present case, the transformation feels more like a redemption than a punishment.

In *Surface Tension*, the modern world—with its gadgetry and packaging, its contradictions and paradoxes—is subsumed into, or swallowed up by, deep, slow time. The artist himself notes: 'Working with stone makes me aware of geological time and the wild flux that forms the land and the material I work with' – a point also made by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda: 'The stone was there before the wind, / Before the man, before the dawn: / Its first movement / Was the first music of the river…'

Rock of ages

Things change. Time does its thing. Things have their time… Over many thousands of years, a clump of mud becomes the most luminous golden rock. In Joe's studio, a one-litre motorcycle oil container becomes an argillite artefact. A utilitarian product is rendered mythopoetic. It is a kind of reclamation and an elevation of the prosaic, the overlooked and the disparaged. As he himself has noted: 'If I can build a relationship that works against the indifference that these chuck-aways represent, that would be good.'

Pointing to another paradox at the heart of this enterprise, Joe refers to the works as 'solid wonders' and asks himself, and us, some of the essential questions of our era: 'Where are we in this flux? What is our relationship to nature?'

He continues: 'I am always pushing against a sense of separation. Equilibrium and balance are themes that I seem to come back to again and again.' Drawn from library or lexicon or from the industrial estate of modern life, Joe Sheehan's art is, in essence, a reconciliation between the human and non-human worlds. Ultimately, albeit reservedly, it enacts an embrace of both. His chosen material, stone, has an inherent capacity to put human life in perspective. Yet *Surface Tension* has a further point to make. It reminds us that the paraphernalia of our ordinary lives – the Tupperware and the screw-top – will in time become the fossils of the present age. Fragments of a visual language, a cultural moment, already hurtling towards their future. Or else motionless in Nicholson's 'library of time', awaiting their hour…

Wellington
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The quotes from Joe Sheehan are from an email exchange with the author, November 2023. Adam Nicholson is quoted from *The sea is not made of water—Life between the tides* (Collins 2021) and Pablo Neruda is quoted from 'Las Piedras del Cielo (Stones from the sky)', translated by James Nolan, included in *The Poetry of Pable Neruda* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2003)