

Irma Blank: Breath Paintings Amalia Pica: Switchboard

Oriel Mostyn Llandudno 15 November to 1 March

Irma Blank's first solo show in a UK public gallery comprises nine 6ft canvases, dating from 1988-92, extracted from the artist's long-running 'Radical Writings' series. The series is distinguished by blue surfaces, in wide or narrow vertical formats, that are rigidly organised into numerous horizontal lines, the colour of which diminishes in intensity between a dark central spine and the edge of the support. The allusion to the typographical layout of an opened book corresponds with the reference to writing in the series' title, while the metaphor of breathing, applied to this exhibition, arises from the system Blank used to determine the chromatic diminuendo of each line. That measure is the duration of a single exhalation; its transcription has a mechanical precision although slight variations in the extended stroke of oil paint modulate the ripple effect across the accumulation of lines. The mark connotes respiration, a process at the core of animal existence, and offers a temporal analogy extended laterally by the serial imagery of pages turned in sequence through the mental space that private reading occupies.

German by birth but resident for over 50 years in Italy where she has exhibited regularly since 1965, Blank is only now becoming known across the rest of Europe where, with the exception of Germany, her work has been unaccountably underexposed. Being inadvertently a latecomer to wider critical attention carries the risk for Blank of being falsely regarded as a follower of esoteric European minimalist abstraction rather than one of its original proponents. This exhibition, and her show late last year at Alison Jacques Gallery in London, go some considerable way to setting the record straight. Her London debut presented a technical overview of Blank's career, selecting mostly single pieces that effectively mapped the lineage of the artist's distinct semiotics, which render writing autonomous of verbal language to return text to a primordial state that organises meaning into visual fields. By limiting itself to one related body of work, the Mostyn installation, by contrast, displays those processes as active elements in an experience. 'I save writing from its enslavement to sense: writing purified of sense,' Blank wrote in 2001, adding that 'writing is the home of being'.

Blank's ideology certainly encompasses the conventional aesthetics of mid-1960s modernism. Found within it are the preference for a serial structure; a few identical acts repeated over and over; the standard allusion to emptying out any relationship with external reality by eliminating volume, figure and the choice of colour; and a strong self-reflexiveness from which to return the viewer to the world. But the show at Mostyn reveals a more complex individual practice than that legacy of established tenets might suggest. Blank's sustained enquiry is directed positively at art's remaining ability to persuade the viewer to experience an altered human consciousness.

Blank has spoken of her script-based aesthetic – which has inevitably been compared with Hanne Darboven's – as an interpretatively 'open

text' in the manner of Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes. The viewer is thus expressly included in the work's claim to exist. Being surrounded by these tall, dark canvases – with their fluent internal horizontal rhythm channelled into the contrapuntal, white voids of wall within a larger but constricted architectural space – approximated a hermetic environment in which sensations of mental transcendence were conceivable.

Blank's expectations for art have their affinity less with the outwardly melancholic negations of Darboven or Roman Opalka than with the inward American sensibilities of Mark Tobey or Mark Rothko. Her material choices also appear down-to-earth. Her use of blue, for instance, is strikingly less a homage to Yves Klein or to stereotypical representations of boundless ethereality – although neither presence can be entirely dismissed – and more an acknowledgement of the most popular tone of ink for everyday writing.

Amalia Pica's work is engaged in comparable research into what art can achieve. Her *Acoustic Radar in Cardboard*, 2010-12, resembles a flawed demonstration of the science of the primitive but sensitive military listening devices that preceded modern sonic detection. The oversized ear trumpet conveys the meaning of concentrated listening but, being executed in dull, non-conductive material, the aesthetically appealing sinuous and fluted form is comically unsuited to the defensive purpose of tracing the far-off sound of approaching invaders. When art replicates, it seems, it manages only an echo of the original experience.

This interest in the limitations of art and communication explains Pica's deliberate pairing with Blank at Mostyn. Pica's work is open to reinterpretation in the changing contexts provided by different installation settings, varying the range of media and, as here, by showing alongside another artist. In that respect, she shares Blank's

Irma Blank
'Radical Writings:
Abecedarium' series
1991

Amalia Pica
Switchboard 2014



commitment to leaving interpretation open to the viewer, although Pica implies that art is, anyway, an imprecise means of transmission.

Working in sculpture, film, photography and performance is as much a metaphor for her of the semantic shortfalls of language as the convoluted linguistic metaphors themselves. As an Argentinian living in London, confronting the pitfalls and slippages that occur in transliterations between tongues may be a personal as well as an artistic reality. Her work has tended to focus on definitions stretched beyond conventional use to meet the needs of description. Unlikely verbal bedfellows result and, for native speaker and foreign ear alike, scope arises for lively misapprehensions. Adopting the term 'catachresis', which broadly describes that occurrence, Pica materialises figures of speech objectively, giving rise to illustrations of inept and absurd combinations as well as to interesting autonomous objects. In *Catachresis No. 40*, 2013, for example, Pica tackles bodily references: applied to inert implements, the image of 'teeth of the rake, leg of the chair, leg of the table, head of the screw' becomes ludicrous. Art, when literal, cannot convey the figurative figuratively.

Access to Blank's univocal environment at Mostyn is through Pica's clamorous installation of the small, the large, the organic and the manufactured, and the plinthed, constructed, floor-based and wall-hung. This space is dominated by *Switchboard (pavilion)*, 2011, the blocky enclosure of which obstructs sightlines and pathways beyond and around it. In a sense, this mock-architectural presence – another monitor of sound, this time a kind of primitive call box – is in apparent conversation with the five other works in its vicinity as well as with visitors who use it to contact each other. Previously seen in different configurations, such as in corridor form at Chisenhale Gallery in 2012, the pavilion's walls are liberally perforated to house tin cans. A glimpse of its interior reveals skeins of string stretching between four walls to connect one can to another. But which of any pair connects? A furtive element surrounds indirect listening: Pica constructs a situation fraught with the possibility of crossed lines and mixed messages that other works pick up. The components of *Time Keeping*, 2009 – a large hand bell recumbent on the floor as if waiting to ring out the class changes instructed by the typed school timetable pinned to the adjacent wall – elicit waves of conflicting childhood memories from any passer-by. ■

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