

WINTER 2015
TRICIA MIDDLETON: JOY IS JUST MELANCHOLY
WITH A REALLY STRONG SENSE OF PURPOSE



EXHIBITIONS | SHERWOOD GALLERY

Tricia Middleton: Joy is just melancholy with a really strong sense of purpose

Curated by Blair Fornwald, Jennifer Matotek, and Wendy Peart

FEBRUARY 14 TO APRIL 22, 2015

Art For Lunch Artist Talk: Friday, February 6, 12:00 pm, University of Regina, RC 050

Artist Talk: Saturday, February 14, 1:00 pm, Sherwood Village Meeting Room

Opening Reception: Saturday, February 14, 2:00 pm

The Girlish Grotesque

by Dagmara Genda

Tricia Middleton's immersive sculptural installations might be described as cavernous swellings resembling geologic aggregates or overgrown body parts. Their colour scheme is electric, replete in phthalic purples and blues, sparkles, neon, and synthetic dyes all connected by the ever-present binary of powder pink and baby blue. Combined with near frantic, fast-paced stream of consciousness texts, the work is as much an emersion of the viewer as an eruption of messy interiority. While there remains a logic to her aesthetic, part of that logic is a retched-up excess as evidenced by the visible corrections and erasures in her text works, and the unrestrained grotesquerie of her amorphous sculptural accumulations.



An influence for her particular palette of excess is Susan Buck-Morss's essay, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics : Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." Launching from Walter Benjamin's closing paragraph in "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Buck-Morss summarizes the development of the term "aesthetic" and how it came head to head with 20th century politics. Within her summary she weaves together widespread 19th century drug use, bourgeoisie phantasmagoria in the form of ornate shopping displays and interiors, and the development of general anaesthesia, which helped us along with our continued self-alienation. A key contradiction Buck-Morss highlights in the notion of the aesthetic is the opposition between male reasoning and female sensuousness. As aesthetics morphed from a sense perception "unworthy of a philosopher,"¹ to a means of analyzing material cultural production, it continuously wavered between gender-biased tropes. But the undercurrent of the sensual persists and it is still often based in the feminine body, or in perceptions thereof. It is this eruption of hysterical, unfathomable femininity that characterizes Middleton's work not as an essentialist proposition but as a tool used to explore the repression of the unreasonable, the interior, and the unabashedly material.

The most recognizable, and perhaps even overwhelming, aspect of Middleton's work is her colour scheme, which she connects to a world ruptured by industrialization, mechanization and drug use. Interestingly, and I think not without coincidence, it just as quickly connects to one of the mass-produced toys of my childhood, the My Little Pony Poof 'n Puff Perfume Palace. Like the



powder pink shell with the baby blue puff on top, her worlds are coloured girlish landscapes replete with sparkles, ribbons, phthalo sheen, and the synthetically-dyed crystals sold in souvenir shops. The smell of Middleton's constructed sites reinforces this childhood familiarity; the soft wax she uses is reminiscent of the pliable plastic the ponies were cast from. The synthetic blues and purples are a common pony palette—also to be found in unicorn and fairy fantasy drawings. But there is a dark undercurrent that runs through her work, and likewise runs through childhood play. With focused effort my friends and I restyled our ponies with Sharpie tattoos and punk hairdos that left them looking vandalized and even abused. Our toys would often be victims to latent aggression that was the result of playground politics or adult chastisement. Though is not just early childhood that Middleton's palette seems to allude to. As we grew out of our childhood play into adolescence, there lingered the trace of immature aesthetic coupled with burgeoning awareness and new emotions. It is this flavour of girlish moodiness that runs through her work and erupts in titles like *Joy is just melancholy with a really strong sense of purpose*. In a similar vein, her texts, seemingly sloppily painted in serif fonts on graph paper, read like an angst-ridden stream of consciousness grappling with the arbitrariness of creativity, femininity, and the art world.

The word “painterly” immediately comes to mind when viewing Middleton's work despite the fact her constructions are not only three-dimensional, but often architectural. It is no surprise, then, that she cites painters like Eleanor Bond and Medrie Macphee as influences. The term “painterly” was coined by



THE
ARTIST'S
NAME
IS
[unreadable]

Swiss critic and art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, whose analysis of Baroque architecture in the late 1800s remains relevant to this day. The trademarks of the painterly include a privileging of movement over stability, an embrace of illusion, and a preference for curves and amorphous forms over straight lines.² Made with melted wax, spray foam, and various organic elements like sand and twigs, Middleton's immersive caverns unabashedly indulge in this sort of drama and mystery. They are like intuitive eruptions, visceral in their presentation, often resembling bodily cavities and internal organs. Spray foam emulates intestinal bulges while the presence of vessels of all sorts, from cups to bottles to various kinds of constructed interiors, speak to the intimate anatomy of the feminine.

Just as aesthetics have been historically deemed unworthy of philosophy, so has the feminine been marginalized and associated with a set of very specific, and often looked down upon, traits. It is thus a particularly challenging territory that Middleton navigates. Positioned between the impulses of childhood and the complexity of adulthood, female teenage awkwardness is the source of gauche aesthetics and false complexities. Using the manufactured symbols of a girlish coming-of-age risks simplifying or playing into a sort of commercialized feminine youth, and it is perhaps this danger that keeps the work interesting. In an art world structured by complex theory, ethical imperatives, and increasingly esoteric discourse, the gauche and naïve might be the most scathing sort of shame. And nothing is more naïve and filled with embarrassment than a teenage coming-to-awareness. Yet there is little else that is as powerful, raw and potentially formative as this very ambiguous, impressionable life passage.

...FLOW."
...VE BEEN IN
...AIN. I'VE BEEN
...CAUSING MYSELF
...PAIN."



Arguably it is the imposing scale that saves the work from teetering over into the territory of the immature or transparently expressive. In her smaller tableaus, like the ones featured in her first solo exhibition at Jessica Bradley, it was a degree of restraint in colour and content that focused the individual pieces on the particular elements she employs. I think it is Middleton's very flirtation with the *gauche* that hints at the interior vulnerability in each and every one of us. Reason cannot easily articulate or tidy up this sort of exposure precisely because it is made through colours and materials already associated with immaturity and embarrassment. We are not as much invited to reflect on that interiority, but by walking amidst immersive cavernous aggregates, and reading eruptive, tortured polemics, we are compelled to feel it in ourselves.

¹ Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics : Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* Vol. 62 (Autumn, 1992), 7. Accessed via <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778700> 13/02/2014 16:45. Buck-Morss quotes mid-eighteenth century philosopher Alexander Baumgarten who for the first time wrote on aesthetics as an autonomous field.

² Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, translated by Katrin Simon (London: Collins, Sons & Co, 1964), 30-32.

Artist Biography

Tricia Middleton recently completed Canada Council-sponsored residencies at Cité internationale des arts de Paris in France and the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York. Her work has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions across Canada and internationally and is in the collection of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.



CREDITS

TRICIA MIDDLETON *Made in France*, 2014-15, 7 text paintings, acrylic on canvas board; 5 text paintings, acrylic on canvas board; 2 text paintings, acrylic on canvas board; 2 text paintings, acrylic on canvas board; collected miscellany

Ladder Buddies, 2013-14, wooden ladder with bedsheets, small clump with fingers, tarps

Weeds/Feu de Bois (detail), 2013-14, weeds, Feu de Bois candle, plaster, paint

Coffee Cup Legs, 2013-14, clothing, beeswax, paint, clay, paper, organic material

Weeds/Feu de Bois (detail), 2013-14, weeds, Feu de Bois candle, plaster, paint

Joy is just melancholy with a really strong sense of purpose installation view, 2015

All photos: Don Hall



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