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Susie MacMurray: *Shell* installation, Pallant House, Chichester, 2006-07

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Susie MacMurray's *Shell* installation manifests in Pallant House, Chichester, like some pulsing exotica, a heavily-textured wall-paper, darkly decorative, heavily luxurious, broodingly present, with more than a hint of the uncanny or the gothic. A remarkable undertaking by an artist of significance, this work's life-span will be just one year, and then it will disappear, leaving no physical trace, but undoubtedly contributing is a much less tangible way to an already rich layering of narrative within this special space.

Declan MacGonagle, then Director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, told me in 1990 that subjectively 'good' art (whatever that is) "speaks to your condition" (apparently, this is a Quaker concept and it has held true for me since then). Pallant House is a Grade 1 listed Queen Anne town house dating from 1712, and MacMurray's mussel shell and velvet installation inhabits the stairwell, folds itself into the space, and hums almost imperceptibly. *Shell's* particular location here, its relationship to MacMurray's previous works, its specific usage of certain key materials, and its exploration through those materials of a range of histories, successfully "speaks to my condition" as both practitioner and critical commentator...

Pallant House itself provides MacMurray with an inspiring location, a firm fundament or authoritative anchor, upon which she has materialised one in a growing range of site-specific, material-specific works of style, grace and integrity. The building resonates with the civic pride, social influence and commanding status of those who pre-date us: the young wine-merchant, Peckham, and his wife, Elizabeth, who lovingly commissioned the house, lovingly appointed it, lovingly appreciated it, but who failed to replicate any of that love within their marriage. MacMurray's installation then is appropriately both steeped in the sadness of a sterile union, and charged with the passion their personal frustration brought – creatively, and with energy – to their surroundings. With *Shell* operating as a symbolically brittle exterior housing either hollow emptiness or a most tender and vulnerable inner, the scene is set for a potent exposition of the emotional history of this unique location.

MacMurray allows us over 20,000 prised opened mussel shells, each crow-black, with an oily sheen, each a tiny death, a *petit mort*, and each stuffed with a deep burnt-red scrap of silk velvet. Each shell beats with sensual energy, but – like butterflies on pins – each is a redundant flag of love, beating out a dying rhythm in regulated ranks on a wall. As sublime as they are sinister, each shell asks us to scoop out its velvet innards, to suck its substance, and consume it utterly, and each knows we won't. That form of passionate intensity was not a part of the lives of Pallant House's founders, and its citation here in this installation is both poignant and powerful.

Susie MacMurray has found a method of making based upon the merging of particular, even peculiar, histories; seductive site specificities; and evocative, frequently emotionally dense,

materials. In her wider body of work we can trace the patterning of this combination over and over. In *Stratum* (2000), for example, 40 kilos of white feather down coated the floor of a Salford Mill like a virgin snow-pelt, simultaneously a comfort signifier, a poetic evanescent mirage, and an unsettling absorbent layer for the blood, sweat and tears of years. Again we can see MacMurray's use of small elements in vast quantity – in this case feathers – to create a work of monumental scale and significance. A whispery soft counter to the crusted layers of pigeon-droppings in this abandoned mill, and a sublime and luminous 'other' to the hard industrial site, MacMurray used this seminal work to articulate her creative essentials: location, materials, history. In *Stratum*, we can witness the development of an artistic signature for subsequent interrogations and revelations.

The absent, but present, body haunts MacMurray's installations: I imagine the ghostly footprints of long-dead mill-workers as they cross *Stratum*'s downy surface to work their looms; I imagine the Peckhams of Pallant House as they pass each other on the stair-case, collaborators in the maintenance of a socially-acceptable façade for their passion-less marriage. MacMurray's talent is in some way to provide a viewer with a space to conjure such narratives. In other works, too, MacMurray finds ingenious methods by which to reference and 'call down' the bodies – the subjects – of spaces that are no longer populated. As a former professional musician of repute, MacMurray's work seems to echo the invisibility or disembodiment of the music-maker. When we are enmeshed in affective sound, in those transcendent moments, it is easy – and important – to forget that music emanates from the fingers or lips of a flawed human being. We want the ageless poetry, the pure perfection, the ancient mystery of sound without body, and we have no desire to witness the obsessive, compulsive, repetitive, even mechanistic means by which sound is created. In some way, MacMurray allows us this fantasy, while insisting on the traces of the human...

MacMurray's execution by hand of these works is assured and confident, these characteristics being other hallmarks of her work, and signs of considerable artistic maturity. The crafting of her pieces is as fine, meticulous and true as their conceptual underpinning, and we can see a skillful and knowing linkage of head, heart and hands in their creation. Frequently, MacMurray refers to the volume or numbers of material or individual elements that combine in her works. She wants us to understand the obsessive making, the investment of time, the sheer hard work involved in putting them together. It is as though MacMurray signposts the invisible patina of her hand-prints on her work, an additional contemporary layer of bodily association adding to those historical references most frequently present. With *Shell*, the elegance of Pallant House is expressed in the composition and creation of the fine oak staircase, which MacMurray has engaged with for this installation. A grand and generous symbol of wealth, confidence and authority, the staircase is also a sign of mortality and of passage onwards. Men carved the oak wood and formed the stairs, and the Peckhams climbed them. Each is dead, a ghostly trace only in dust, but outlasted by the timelessness of crafting. Such sentiments resonate and are re-articulated in *Shell*.

MacMurray's material range is important: she has worked with feathers, shells, hair, latex, with manilla fibres, and more recently with cotton ear plugs and plastic food wrap. Each material is carefully considered to find its emotional pitch and to activate its internal content. In *Maidenhair* (2001), for example, human hair was French knitted to create an ephemeral, delicate, almost not-there chain stretching 10.3 metres, a chain to tie up your virgin's heart and bind your maiden memories. A simple work, the potency lies in the implication of an anonymous 'one', the donor of the hair, as enthralling to them – literally capturing and

imprisoning their essence – as it is enthralling to us. When I first encountered this work, having seen the work of other artists – Ann Wilson, Emily Bates, Alice Maher – who activate the special power of human hair, I was electrified by the perfect pitch of the moment when my body entered its affective arena, and the human thread knotted itself around the intangible, ephemeral, essential parts of my soul.

Other works in MacMurray's portfolio have picked up the hair-thread-net motif. In *Echo* (2006), freshly installed at York St. Mary's, MacMurray has responded to a location for human worship, contemplation, and reflection stretching back almost a millennium. To capture something of the atmospheric traces and ethereal significances of this place, 10,000 fragile hairnets are coupled with 3,580 discarded – though still potent – violin bow-strings. The hairnets – delicate, inconsequential vessels, destined to disintegrate and decay as we all are – encase the strings, themselves invested with the bodily markings of the horses from whose bodies they have been harvested and the violinists whose fingers pressed and drew them. MacMurray tells us that

Violin bow hair carries traces of its former use as an accomplice in the intense, sublime and emotive human experience of music making. When I first came across them, coiled up as the violinmaker discards them, they reminded me of little memorial wreaths or Victorian mementos.
(Artist's Statement, 2006).

The notion of implication suggested by the word 'accomplice' is interesting for MacMurray most certainly seeks to embroil us, to implicate us, to make accomplices of us – emotionally and experientially – within her work. We get caught up in her uterine netted sacs, in her shivering strings and tight coils, in the feminine tissues and gauzes of hair, drawn lines, threads and filaments.

MacMurray resides within a distinguished field of artists whose concerns touch – but don't quite mimic – hers. In conversation, we cite Eva Hesse (liberator of emotional content from unstable and evocative materials), Mona Hatoum (penetrator of bodies and the bodily), Ann Hamilton (interrogator of the still centre of practice), Rebecca Horne (evoker of the vibrating essence of being). We compare notes on Janine Antoni (licker and latherer of chocolate and fat); Helen Chadwick (seducer of the sensual); and Louise Bourgeois (maker of the maternal monumental). MacMurray also references Donald Judd and Anslem Torsione, and I can see the cool pure modernism of the former and the Arte Povera tensions of the latter. But, I see more, and it seems perhaps a little reductionist and unimaginative to locate MacMurray too firmly in this canon. There remains a kind of control, a discipline, a tautness, in MacMurray's general oeuvre that seeks those references, but the evidence is there of great idiosyncrasy and originality. The drawings (which MacMurray significantly states that she 'loves' as a means of meditative practice and material examination) of giant hair sections and massive hairnets testify to a drive for singular expression, and the installation titled *Argus* (2004) in which a field of peacock feathers are 'blinded' shows a linguistic sensuality and poetic physicality not necessarily echoed in the references to modernist practice or indeed – infrequently – in other contemporary material practices...

Caryatids (2004), for example, is a group of seven wall-mounted spheres of peacock 'side sword' feathers. An intellectually challenging work, its title refers to sculpted female figures serving as ornamental supports in place of a column or pilaster, a common architectural motif

at various points from the Renaissance onwards. The caryatid motif appeared in Egyptian and Greek architecture, most notably in the *Porch of the Caryatids* on the Acropolis at Athens, where six beautifully sculpted draped female figures support its entablature. Perhaps significantly, one is a replica, with the original being held captive amongst the Elgin Marbles in London. In this work, as in all others, MacMurray provides us with a potent prospect for interpretation, interrogation, and – of course – appreciation. The work puzzles though – there are seven elements, while the celebrated Caryatids numbered six. Moreover, while they are materially stony, MacMurray's are constructed from the most decadent, most strutting, most fabulous of materials – peacock feathers, with their associations of pride and vanity, hubris and conceit. Could this be a defiant massing of the gorgeous: Elgin captive, Acropolis replica, and the five free originals in a sisterhood of seven, proud and glamorous, in the face of imperialist, colonialist, sexist pressure? Nothing is given away, but the titling is not accidental. *Caryatids* is a gorgeous work, a strutting piece that conjures the feminine desire to 'shake your tail-feathers'. Its explicit provocation has an earthy gregariousness that is warm, sexy and appealing.

MacMurray's *Shell* is more subdued, its profound references to memento mori, to mourning, to gender and class, its impenetrable façade, its representation of the rhythmic passage of time, or sadness and loss are intense, emotion-ridden, and pungent. These are some of the best characteristics of Susie MacMurray's practice.