

TERRI BROOKS The depth of nowhere - PRINCIPIA -

Home / The Sineresi exhibitions / TERRI BROOKS The depth of ...



Categories

| | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| Book as a gift | (3) |
| Clip | (129) |
| Déjà vu | (22) |
| Editorials | (5) |
| Interea | (25) |
| The Sineresi exhibitions | (14) |
| Lucania Invenienda | (10) |
| Profiles | (4) |
| Uncategorized | (11) |

Recent articles

-  **TERRI BROOKS The depth of nowhere - PRINCIPIA -**
4 October 2020
-  **GIUSEPPE SATRIANI - inner-landscapes -**
9 September 2020

The profundity of nothing

Terri Brooks: Principia
A.J.Byrnes

What is abstract art good for? What's the use for us as individuals or as a society – of pictures of nothing, of paintings or sculptures or drawings that on initial encounter, do not seem to show anything but themselves? These opening words in a seminal text by American writer and academic Kirk Varnedoe succinctly articulate the fight for legitimacy both abstract minimal art and its advocates have had to endure since its reception in the middle part of the Twentieth Century.

The oeuvre of Melbourne abstractionist Terri Brooks and indeed the works in this exhibition Principia invite this same general misunderstandings and scepticism that people often bring to an experience of abstract art. However what is made manifestly clear through this beautifully constructed and intellectually engaging exhibition is that more than just pure looking is necessary to understand the highly poetic and symbolic visual language of artist Terri Brooks.

The paintings in this exhibition reflect an engagement with environments both urban and bucolic. Brooks seeks out spaces – the weathered surfaces of stone, concrete and timber, the irregular geometries and patterning of natural objects, the climatic vacillations of season, the vertical thrust of the urban environment and the boundless horizontals of rural space – distilling such experiences and reducing them visually to their purest and most fundamental state in order to make tangible, a sentient and personal world.

Significantly, Principia presents viewers with a compelling paradox – whilst projecting a rough and imprecise aesthetic, in ordnately obdurate in its gestural repetition, persistent in its reference to loosely gridded forms and resolutely reductive in its final analysis this work proffers the viewer with a subtle conceptual didacticism.

Paintings are not simply visual objects without any connection to concepts that can be analysed then evaluated – all objects of design project an impression of the psychological and moral attitude it supports.

So what is the beneficence of Brooks' abstraction? Where can it be located? And how is it to be understood?

The deployment of reductionist aesthetics and the modernist grid – albeit an often disassembled one in Brooks’ work, provide key points of departure for both artist and viewer. The physical properties of the grid offer stasis and a lack of hierarchy, which informs the transformative promise of this work. Attention is given to the simplicity of the works’ structure, to their ordered qualities and muteness, which directs the viewer back upon the quality of his or her own perceptions. The viewer moves from a state of chaos to inner equilibrium and focused attention and as a consequence, one is urged to reflect on the present at a profoundly physical level. Every aspect of such an experience, its reflectiveness, the manner in which it illuminates the nature of our feeling and knowing through an object, a spatial situation, suggests an analogy to the posture and method of phenomenological inquiry.^[1]

Brooks draws the viewer in, establishing intimate connections with these works through a strategic play of internal relations; connections set up by gestural articulations, delicate layering of colours, serendipitous moments of form and the strategic placement of compositional elements. Curiously these works then operate to force the viewer to a distance from where all the component parts of the work become critical elements of an integrated whole and where the architectural space in which these works are shown also demands recognition as a key aesthetic element.

This is art that eliminates the descriptive, excludes the pictorial, narrative and the fictive, thus focusing on the essential in form, creating what is often referred to as a truth.^[2] Thus Brooks’ reduced aesthetic approach speaks to us about order, directness, integrity, veracity and morality; accordingly these stylistic predilections function to extend an invitation for the audience to be purposeful, ethical and socially equitable – the material articulation of our ideas of a good life. This idea that Brooks’ art – or any art for that matter, can speak to us on matters of morality and truth, helps us to place at the very centre of our aesthetic conundrums the question of the values we want to live by rather than merely how we want things to look.

We started here with an explication on the censures often levelled at abstract art as a platform for the discussion of the profound weightiness of Brooks’ paintings of nothing and we finish with the poignant words of English poet Robert Browning,

That which is less complicated is often better understood and more appreciated than what is more complicated; simplicity is preferable to complexity; brevity in communication is more effective than verbosity.

^[1] Michelson as cited in: Minimalism – Meyer, Phaidon publishing NY, 2000, reprinted 2005.

^[2] Lucy Lippard, The Silent Art, Art in America Magazine, (January – February ed) 1967, Art in America Publications.



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Brooks - 1967 - 1968 - 1969 - 1970 - 1971 - 1972 - 1973 - 1974 - 1975 - 1976 - 1977 - 1978 - 1979 - 1980 - 1981 - 1982 - 1983 - 1984 - 1985 - 1986 - 1987 - 1988 - 1989 - 1990 - 1991 - 1992 - 1993 - 1994 - 1995 - 1996 - 1997 - 1998 - 1999 - 2000 - 2001 - 2002 - 2003 - 2004 - 2005 - 2006 - 2007 - 2008 - 2009 - 2010 - 2011 - 2012 - 2013 - 2014 - 2015 - 2016 - 2017 - 2018 - 2019 - 2020 - 2021 - 2022 - 2023 - 2024 - 2025



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