

Sarah Staton, 'Green – or how we missed Modernism' and Georgie Hopton, 'Laughed - I could have cried'

Kim Hodge, 2003



A lot of the goings on in the art-world are mainstream media affairs these days, an insidious change we have seen evolve over the past 12 years, and completely welcomed by some. No longer is the world of artists populated only by those driven to starve themselves in seedy garrets, or to drink incessantly in order to act out the role of Bohemian, as is traditionally perceived. Today, there are artists out there for whom the hot-blooded passion of creativity turns into a cold-blooded career choice. As to whether that is a good or a bad thing, I would say: it's great for those who are great artists because they now have the forum to become huge celebrities on the current media-frenzied art-world stage. Yet at the same time, those with a lesser talent fall by the wayside, so we get used to hearing of resting artists in the way we used to hear of resting actors.

But the media aren't solely responsible for creating our zeitgeist's art frenzy. Every part of the art establishment is becoming increasingly industrialized and homogenized; everything is accessible to everyone without any great effort on his or her part whatsoever. Museums are housing exhibitions on a grand-scale, blockbuster exhibitions and blockbuster visitor spending, as if that's the most important purpose of, and use for, the art housed by these august and cultural institutions. These large productions also have the advantage of being easy for the media to write about, as we can see from more and more journalists believing themselves to be critics and writing about art issues without adequate homework or preparation beforehand.

There exists another, more even ground for artists who concern themselves with both talent and sincerity. A world away from the mass media-frenzy-not always as sincere as it might be-and that's where we find Sarah Staton and Georgie Hopton. Brit artist Staton admires London's Whitechapel Museum for: ". . . retaining their integrity and making continual efforts to be both interesting and accessible." Keen on accessibility, she believes that artists ought to speak to, and make contact with the audience. Quite right. Why should artists live, or act as if they live, in a rarefied world, which patronizes those who are, in the end, their patrons? And Georgie Hopton admires the Natural History Museum in Dublin, Ireland, preferring it to the one in London, as the Dublin version is: ". . . left almost as the Victorians would have enjoyed it . . . there are cabinets covered with cloths you must lift up to uncover the surprises lying underneath them. There are no large plastic buttons to push or garish signs to read . . . it all makes the learning process so much more physical . . . something I find very gratifying . . ."

Sarah Staton is an artist and sculptor who has long held passions for architecture and fashion, although she studied art at St Martins College, London. It's a great loss that she can't actually be three people: in another life she might be an architect (not only drawing, like Oscar Mathias Ungers, but a hands-on, leave-me-free-to-

create-it-and-build-it type), or a consummate fashion designer, producing clothes that would delight both Jean Muir and Oswald Botang for their perfect balance and line. For the moment, however, Sarah is working in the world of plastic arts, on pieces that fit inside a gallery for our viewing delight. Her recent show at the UK's new gallery, MK G, entitled: 'Green-Or How We Missed Modernism' offered her new narratives in the arrangements of space; narratives which were not at all clear initially and slowed down the installation process, but the ever-pragmatic Staton—and she has to be pragmatic, managing the life of her first child and patiently awaiting a second while pursuing her career in several countries—always lives up to her responsibilities and commitments. As she told me herself, she enjoys “. . . the rush, the challenge and the thrill of last-minute show arranging.”

At the same time, MK G hosted Georgie Hopton's: 'Laughed-I Could Have Cried', which impressed me with the tranquillity of her current sculptural works. Her most recent working references are Fantin-Latour, Picasso, Mirandi, and Degas, while others seem to stretch back further than that, even to the fanciful and child-like paintings of the early Romans. Hopton's character, as ever, is a wistful one and feelings of sadness are juxtaposed with those of happiness once again, a recurrent and strong flavor in her work. An equally tremulous juxtaposition comes to Georgie's real life on a daily basis, from the anxiety of wanting to make really good works and from her love of the actual work processes. With a mother who would knit and sew divinely, a father who made artisanal 'bits 'n pieces' apparently effortlessly and a yBa husband who paints, it would be strange if Hopton didn't want to translate some of the qualities she loves and admires in these people into her own work. Making her lines of artistic influences hereditary as well as historical.

The two shows took place earlier in 2003, and I spoke to the artists in London last month. About the experience of exhibiting at the still adolescent Milton Keynes Gallery, Staton says that it was great for her to see local residents so interested in what's going on; they seem to have appropriated the gallery as their own. This appropriation of their surroundings is, I believe, a way of life they have been obliged to do adopt order to provide the unattached residents of a new town with a sense of attachment.

Ever since the 'Supastores' which Staton eventually set-aside when they became a bonsai version of art-making-too much administration and not enough actual art production—and the stylized shelves and packaging she created for a British Council show, her work has insisted upon scale and control. Her working process involves visualization, paper, models, scaling, and elevations (elevations are consistently important to her), as well as watercolors, a new area for Staton. Her watercolors began in the run-up to the show at MK G, intended as simple plans for her sculptures, but their execution and results so pleased her, that she has continued to concentrate on, and develop them more. “Doing the watercolors as well made preparing for the MK G show like preparing for two shows simultaneously,” she told me, and she describes watercolors as being somewhere between art and painting and, in her case, working drawings, which stand alone as pieces in their own right.

Her current work clearly wants to play with architectural elements, in particular the utopian architecture of the twentieth century when the shadow of the Gothic Revival still loomed. Indeed, Staton notices much of the 1850-1950 Gothic Revival present in our cities and admires its interaction with the landscaping around it. The whole Gothic Revival period was: “. . . really exciting . . . especially their hauntingly evocative mills. . . ,” and she assures me: “. . . I'm not alone, even Bauhaus and Gropius began to like the godliness, reverence and inspiration felt from studying soaring Gothic buildings.” It was also an important moment for the British history of construction as other countries looked to a fertile Britain for building influences.

Staton mixes the architectural merits of tall buildings with the emotions brought to those who stand in their shadows; evocation and towers emerged as the theme of the show, as this year she has noticed towers everywhere, even in recently publicised charts of the 1975-2000 oil-production of Iraq. The MK G exhibition succeeded in triggering memories of places where we may each have stood in unselfconscious contemplation, as well as putting Englishness into a sculpted form. I doubt whether Staton herself is ever unselfconscious as she's so acutely aware of all that surrounds her; the kind of observer that stand-up comedians must be in order to replay the behavioural minutiae of their subjects. For Staton the detailed observations may be the same but her replay of them addresses the buried emotions in people's memories rather than their sense of self-parody.

Continuing with the theme of towers, Staton also sees them invading different parts of today's society, not always as built-objects but as articles we read in our daily papers, for example, charts and graphs informing us of our cholesterol level, our average salaries, the frequency of our sex drive. So in life, landscapes and towers, there are, according to Staton, highs and lows everywhere, ". . . even junk food gives it! People talk of the 'high' they get from chocolate, alco-pops, or whatever" she exclaims. She then muses on the idea of our modern, nannified humanity necessitating these man-made creations of highs and lows in our daily lives. In earlier times we would have frequently released emotive adrenaline as we dealt with natural disasters, experienced the thrill of success or tasted the disappointment of a hunt. Today, the West's manufacture and production of everything including our basic food needs, obliterates a great many of these natural adrenaline promoters. The highs and lows of Staton's current work inform her references to architecture as well as charting the adrenaline patterns of our society. Her work evokes images of re-birth quite intensely, and the play of real and artificial light falling on the recycled plastics of her sculptures, glimmers hopefully, turning the old into the new, and helping to fulfil Staton's promise to the viewer. Vague stirrings of sadness and death are counteracted by feelings of regeneration as we see these materials reused; her own revival attempt. Thanks to the MK G's excellent fenestration, the clean, bright daylight crossing the rooms played with Staton's work perfectly, rippling across the surface of the sculptures as the light of gods cross our lives. Staton manages to capture, or create, a sense of past and future, destiny and hope, loss and revival.

Sarah is currently completing her Henry Moore Fellowship in Sheffield, moving north this summer to do so. She is looking forward to the inspiration to be gained from living in an ex-steel town with a poignant, recent social history. Another chance to explore themes death and revival perhaps? One assumes that Sheffield also offers Sarah the opportunity to stabilise the sense of egalitarian projects often lost by London artists, working away from the old-fashioned capital-centricity of certain elements of the British media industry. I left Sarah entwined with her current project-a Loch-Ness-Monster in anodised aluminium. Charming, beautiful rather than scary, it is a small and perfectly formed sculpture: absorbing, thoughtful, playful and, of course, a triumph of perfect scale.

Georgie Hopton has made some sparkly, glittery, all-singing all-dancing sculptures in the last years, but 'Laughed - I Could Have Cried' is a display of painting and sculpture in quieter and more muted hues, where her sculptures are like tableaux from mediaeval plays: small moments from the past, frozen in time. The whole show feels set in silence. This reverence is new but entirely explicable: Hopton normally works alone in a light, airy studio with great views of sky and trees and a virtually noise-free environment, but recently her peace has been disturbed by the noise of

demolition and rebuilding going on across the road. Would this offensive noise-pollution, inevitable given the mass regeneration taking place in so many parts of

London, have anything to do with the decrease in noise levels of her own works? Habitually working in isolation and solitude, with the inoffensive and occasional hum of Radio 4 for company, Georgie has found this recent external noise so invasive that she has filled her artworks with the calmness and quietness missing from the studio.

The non-audible state of these works is further echoed by their stillness, which is also surprising. A lover of joyous movement, especially the graceful moves found in ballet, Hopton recently performed in a video piece as a beautiful, ethereal and poised ballerina. Where her past works have hop, skipped and jumped before the viewer's eye, these works are immobile. They are subdued and humble shots of still life in 3D form, which manage to be extreme in many aspects: extreme in their stillness (the single movement of any kind can be imagined in her painting 'The Jugglers' where sudden, localized spots of red tumble around the feet of a delicate table); in their silence and in their smallness. And the works are small - Hopton is bothered by a lot of the big and the blasé in today's world, both in art and in life. "Big needs to be justified " she insists and says that she couldn't justify working on any larger scale with her current pieces. The whimsical side of Hopton's nature is highlighted by the repeated use of circus-type symbols in her work. A lover of bows, Pierrots, jacardi-patterns, and the traditional artists palettes that are seen depicted in children's coloring books, Pierrot is her favourite drawn figure: " . . . he exaggerates silently," she says, "he's unreal but of the real and he embodies the two elements in life and art that I am most interested in: comedy and tragedy." Considering her own quirky style of philosophising on society and its mores, the silent, watchful Pierrot is an understandable symbol for Hopton. They both appear to stand back and see a sad irony in much of what amuses the public at large, and the humour in what are often considered to be tragedies of modern life.

In a recent interview with Louisa Buck, Hopton quotes an idea of Picasso's she recently came across: " . . . one of the most constructive things a painter can say about painting is sculpture . . ." an idea deeply echoed in her own mind. Ever juggling and changing mediums - Georgie paints and sculpts alternatively - her figurative paintings become fully-formed statues yearning to step off the canvas into a 3-dimensional world and her sculptures are actually foreshortened in real-life as if they were being produced for the 2-dimensional world of paint on canvas. Georgie, a painting student who graduated with sculpture, has long been a passionate Picasso admirer, so the discovery of a mutual understanding of the innate relationship between the two mediums must be rather pleasing to her.

There are artists, some of them yBa's, who are evangelical about their public image and love to use the furor made possible by the media to their own end. A lesser number of them, Hopton included, are simply evangelical about their art. Hopton's own quiet and introspective search isn't spotlighted in a screaming, startling world of "Where's the noise?" but what is she zealous about? Firstly, she has a fervent desire to see chronology in works of art at the new Tate, and less of those patronising signs telling you what you are going to see before you even see it. But her most evangelical quest is that of search and discovery. She believes that searches and searching are good things to undertake, they take you down a path of learning which, in turn, puts you on the road to receiving wisdom. She insists that all enquiry ends in learning and that constant search and enquiry are immeasurably important in our lives. Hopton herself learns by osmosis: she watches, reads and listens to as many differing styles of life as possible, absorption is an important part of her yearning for a daily increase in knowledge. She wants to make sure that she never stagnates, never closes down. As Georgie Hopton continues to learn from life, I wonder whether the range of her work will broaden, or whether her intensity will narrow it down to tiny, particular details for us to learn from?