

Millicent Young: Remembering Awe

Sculptor Millicent Young's elegant minimalism is both paean to nature and compelling aesthetic statement that pays homage to both the ancient and contemporary. With materials that share an austere, clean, organic sensibility, Young limns a personal oeuvre that demands the viewer to slow down and pay attention.

"Most all my work is simultaneously personal and profoundly connected to the world, to our living history of atrocities and vanishing habitats and species collapse and meltings and so on, and it's also joined with the inexplicable beauty that binds us."

A combination of accident and intuition goes into the selection of materials Young gravitates toward and uses. Ordinary, non-precious, they share an intrinsic beauty, mystery, and even paradoxical quality. She is drawn to them both for these attributes and also for their capacity to transcend them to become something much greater.

For instance, horsehair gathers light and moves. And it has this associative aspect; it's not quite us; it's not quite the other. We have hair too, but horsehair is not our hair. It's from a living being, but it's dead. And it has a memory in its DNA. "It ends up being a material that draws you in, but it's also elusive. I like that. I like that it is both beautiful, and for some people a little creepy, even if it's thinking: but where did this hair come from? So it's beautiful, but not entirely easy."

Young began using horsehair quite serendipitously when in need of a strand-like substance for a sculpture, she happened to catch sight of a hank of horsehair on a hook in her studio, a commemorative relic of an animal who had died. That day, sunlight was hitting the hair and Young was transfixed by its luminosity. It's one of those things one doesn't normally notice, but horsehair possesses a peculiar incandescence that makes the strands almost seem lit from within.

Composed of 1,500 strands of white horsehair *Luminous Room* is a bewitching rectangle of light. Standing in front of it, one feels hushed and humbled by the simple and yet utterly sacred beauty on display. The shape and substance evoke an enclosed room, but its luminosity suggests the absence of physicality and the quite opposite meaning of "room" as endless space. This conundrum is a key element of the piece.

Each strand is made by drawing out a long piece of thread and tying slipknots periodically along it into which tiny bundles of horsehair—5 or 8—are placed. The slipknot is pulled tight and a drop of glue is added to secure the strand in place. Then, each template strand of several bundles is hung individually, one by one onto cables. It's a very laborious and meditative process to make and install.

Young groups thicker bundles towards the center of *Luminous Room*, which creates the effect of a shaft of light from which emanates a glowing halo made up of the surrounding hair. These central clusters of hair are also longer, pooling on the floor beneath the piece.

Made from brown horsehair, which is less incandescent than white, *Murmuration III* draws attention to the other physical traits of horsehair: its coarseness, its waviness, its ombré

tonalities. The distinctly wing-like shape of the sculpture adds an exhilarating flourish and also references the starlings of the whirling, aerodynamic display from which the piece takes its title.

Working with plaster and teabags filled with wood ash and pigment Young produces what is perhaps her most enigmatic and emotionally charged work. "Plaster has a real materiality to it, it has a wet and dry cycle and a real sense of flow. I love the intimacy of the surface and how it records every nuance of the cast tea bags in an indelible way. That was important to me because violence is that way—how it marks us, marks the earth, marked me."

Young submerges the teabags at various levels in wet plaster. She then excavates them once the plaster has dried. She became obsessed with this process, painstakingly removing the contents and peeling out the paper casing. "The whole thing was like excavating a body. The associations are just intense, peeling the tea bag is like peeling away the skin." On some, she backfills the excavated part with plaster and then squirts it down so the pigments run. At the very end, she adds delicate line drawings of wings above the wound-like depressions. These wisps of graphite have an immateriality that stands in such contrast to the solid presence of the plaster, they catch you unaware. "The wings arrived at the very last, very suddenly and without being re-worked, and I knew that I wanted them in the faintest pencil and just one line." Even to her their meaning is cryptic, but they seem to imply a redemption of sorts.

With *Ghost IV*, Young turns the plaster panel around to expose the convex impressions of the teabags. Just as the concave shapes suggest a variety of associations, these evoke graves, gestational bulges, pods. Suspense and anticipation hover over this work. What is beneath the surface and is it about to burst forth?

Mounted on handsome oxidized steel slabs that conjure a watery backdrop, there is refinement and restraint in how the plaster pieces are presented. This rarefied and considered approach to fabrication and presentation is characteristic of Young's approach.

Young says of the plaster pieces: "This is the most intimately cathartic work I have ever done; I realized what I was working with was my own experience of violence that was done to me and was still inhabiting me. But at the same time, the work is connected with all that's going on in the world."

Young brings a sculptor's sense of materiality to her two-dimensional work. She uses washi paper, which has a particular translucence and is known for its ready absorption. The ink doesn't sit on the surface but stains the paper. In *Slow Violence* Young's extravagant blooms of ink resemble blossoms or vapor. They appear both benign and also rather nefarious with hints of red pigment suggesting vestiges of the violence of the title. The title provides another conundrum that gives us pause. It seems almost oxymoronic—doesn't violence happen in quick, explosive bursts? Here, "slow" adds an insidious note, implying a history of violence, happening over a period of time.

An Unfinished Story, another washi paper and ink work, takes the form of a traditional Japanese scroll with drips and daubs of ink forming a graceful line of contained energy. Young's aesthetic is so aligned with the Japanese, it's not surprising she would incorporate the scroll form, but she

also uses it expressively, arranging the rolled up sections of the paper to screen, and thus draw attention to, passages tinged with red—Young's surrogate for violence.

"These works became a conversation about movement. The density of the ink the expansion and contraction of the paper, etc. And you only get one chance. For every one like this, there are 20 others that didn't work."

Moving through all of Young's work is the concept of the kōan, a Buddhist teaching tool that takes the form of a nonsensical question intended to help focus the mind by leading it to a place where patterned constructs fall apart. The kōan is there to stop you, causing you to observe and consider natural, everyday phenomena that we tend to overlook. The beauty, the magic and sacredness, it's all right there, if you only harken and look.

"My hope for my work is that it brings us to a place where we remember awe. I would never want to say that my work inspires awe; that's not who I am. Awe is out there, but we forget about it. One of the things awe does is it silences us. It shares this with the kōan; after the kōan, it's silent. In the Buddhist tradition, silence is necessary to become awake." It is then, in this heightened state of awareness that awe returns and we can truly see and appreciate the sublime.

Sarah Sargent