

Julie Brooke

One Way or Another: Leah Bullen and Susan Chancellor

At first sight, Leah Bullen's dense accumulations of tiny marks might seem to have little in common with the atmospheric grounds and geometric forms of Susan Chancellor's works on board. Both artists explore the natural world, however Bullen's subject matter is the constructed environment of the aquarium or hot house, while Susan's focus is the wind and weather of the coastal landscape. Bullen's investigation begins with photographs collaged into spatially disorientating panoramas; Chancellor draws instead on her memory, reliving in the studio the frustrations of attempting to pin down the shifting aspect of sky, land and sea.

Chancellor lives and works by the sea. Her daily observation of the movement of shadows over water and mountains is recorded in multiple panels and translated into gestural linear forms and soft clouds of colour. Detail is abstracted away, and what remains is that which changes from hour to hour – the quality of light, the movement of shadows, the mists that obscure her view. By contrast, the density of marks and multiple viewpoints of Bullen's work deliver an overload of information that we struggle to resolve into a coherent and comprehensible image. As she suggests, the work can flip between 'being recognised as something and being read purely as mark, colour, texture.' Composed using photographs taken during her explorations of public spaces such as botanical gardens and museums, each of Bullen's works compresses time and space into a single image.

Despite these differences in approach and visual language, it becomes apparent that there are compelling points of convergence. *One Way or Another* represents the fascination of both artists with the impossibility of creating a definitive or comprehensive representation of a world that shifts as we move through space and time. In wrestling with the problem of translating the passage of time into two dimensional space, both engage in a delicate negotiation between representation and abstraction. And there's a further point of convergence: while both Bullen and

Chancellor are Painting PhD candidates, the works that you see around you are not conventional paintings, but monotypes.

A monotype is the single print that results from building up on a smooth and unmarked printing plate an image which is then transferred to a surface such as paper or board. This is an uncertain process in which the outcome is unpredictable. If the image transfers only partially, if the paper sticks or tears, the only option is to wipe the plate clean and to begin again. As Bullen says, 'printing day is always a mixture of excitement and stomach-churning anxiety.' Making a monotype, then, is clearly something of a gamble. The works in this exhibition are the result of weeks of patient trial and error, and the question arises as to why an artist would put at risk so many hours of careful preparation.

In part, it seems that it is this very unpredictability that can become addictive. As Chancellor says, 'what got me hooked was the surprise element inherent in the printing process,' while Bullen describes the delight she takes in the strangeness of the textures that appear in the final image. Furthermore, it is clear from the diverse approaches that Bullen and Chancellor have taken that this is a versatile technique, and that both relish the opportunity to experiment and innovate. This sense of freedom is reflected in Chancellor's comment that despite ten years of experimentation, she does not consider herself to be 'a proper printmaker with all the technical ability of the craft that 'printmaker' implies.' In other words, Bullen and Chancellor began this journey unconstrained by hard and fast rules, allowing them to develop highly personal and finely tuned approaches to image-making.

For Chancellor, the monotype creates opportunities to work with different combinations of materials – with oil and water based paints, for example – and with different techniques including collage, painting and drawing. The process does not end on printing day as she draws back into the images over a period of days or weeks, and hanging the work creates a new set of challenges as she works out a final composition. The geometric elements are brushed rapidly in oils onto a transparent printing plate and then 'tested' against prepared boards already painted in soft layers of gouache. These

linear forms are wiped away and re-painted until considered sufficiently expressive of a remembered movement of wind and light, a decision which must be made quickly if the paint is to be transferred before it dries. Hesitate for too long, and the sticky oil paint clings to the plate. Gaps in the final image through which the underlying board shows reveal Chancellor's deliberations as time passes in the studio.

Bullen's images are constructed painstakingly over many days, after lengthy periods of experimentation with water-based media and pigments. Unlike traditional paintings, these layered monotypes are built up from front to back. That is, the highlights and foreground details – the delicate spines of a cactus, for example, or the petals of a flower – must be painted first onto the printing plate, and then concealed beneath layers of background detail. What later becomes the surface of the work is hidden until the layers are reversed as plate, paint and paper pass through the press. This process is not only a literal flattening. It creates a spatial, perceptual flattening where the brushstrokes that construct the final image – whether belonging to the foreground or the background – become equivalent in terms of their material presence. Marks constituting flowers, figures, or foliage may have the same scale and form, creating visual confusion as the image dissolves and reassembles before the viewer's eyes.

Despite these differences in approach, both Bullen and Chancellor's painterly monotypes embody a series of transformations: a reversal from left to right and from front to back, a flattening of the matter of paint as it passes through the press. *One Way or Another* creates a 'through the looking glass' moment for the viewer in which the familiar is made strange, a strangeness inseparable from the process by which these works are made. By embracing uncertainty in the studio, Bullen and Chancellor convey not only a vision but an experience of the world, translating time into pictorial space as the expressive mark on the plate transforms into the memory of a gesture.

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