



Finding Stillness

In the space of Phoebe McDonald's exhibition *Explorations of light and sound* there are two kinds of work: photographs and sculptural objects. There is no sound audible. In this essay, I focus on a series of photographs taken in a glacial landscape and a series of small (about face-sized) round low-relief sculptures that could be described as symmetrical brass 'drawings'.

Differences in the two bodies of work are striking, so my first responses diverge. Initially there appears to be no common ground on which to approach the artworks except, perhaps, their reduced aesthetic. A question is posed: in what ways do they converse with or complement each other? And what might a viewer's place be in that exchange?

The photographs titled *A cloud can never die: Ice, water, mist*, show strange vulnerable dangerous landscapes where above all water transformed by temperature has been piled up, banked, cracked, split, powdered, striated, rippled, crystallized and vaporized. As all photographs do, these recruit the medium of light and shade to describe form. I can see in these images that subtle changes in reflected light and shadows on white surfaces have been recorded at various times in different light conditions, echoing previous bodies of work from Phoebe's practice. The photographs are beautiful and may provoke closer attention, but in conjunction with the other works in the show — and the title of the exhibition is a clue here — it is clear that seeing these images as primarily visually descriptive is not the point, or not the whole point.

On a purely formal level, without reference to the source of their configuration, the circular works titled *Resonance* are arresting. Each is the kind of pattern that conventional painters avoid incorporating in their paintings because the so-called 'moving eye' of a viewer would be obliged to move repetitively between centre and periphery of these shapes rather than traversing the entire painting's surface. Thus these brass objects act as simple and direct focussing devices, and viewing the exhibition is slowed by their presence.

The internal geometric shapes in *Resonance* are based on nodal lines recorded by Ernst Chladni in the late eighteenth century when he described patterns created by sound vibrations applied to metal plates sprinkled with sand (water and other substances also form surface patterns when sound vibrations are applied). On a metal plate vibrating harmoniously, fine sand migrates away from areas of vibration to form lines that are passages of stillness; different harmonies produce different formations of nodal lines. The particular Chladni patterns used for *Resonance* were selected by the artist for their visible centrality, and in reference to those patterns the solid areas represent motionlessness, while the gaps represent zones of movement.

The photographs could be said to be based on a kind of restriction. The decision to photograph the light of endless days of Greenland's snowy summer landscape was allied to its quality of relative stillness and quiet, its restricted colour and lack of visible habitation. An effect of such a visually and aurally simplified landscape can be one of focus, or of quieting the mind, allowing a state of heightened awareness or mindfulness that also influenced artists such as Agnes Martin and Robert Irwin interested in Buddhist philosophy as an important aspect of their artmaking in the 1960s.

But it is clear from reading the photographs, if not from other sources, that this visually reductive landscape is highly impermanent and dynamic, always in a process of change. It isn't only the subtle light that is transitory. What we see as the land, in fact, is what in less extreme conditions would be described as merely the covering of ice and snow, blanketing the earth below temporarily, an effect of weather rather than the lie of the land. This landscape is an environment of brittle process where the flux of water from mist to liquid to solid and back again is continuous.

I return to thoughts of the purposeful cohabitation between brass sculptures and photographs in the gallery space, and find myself framing this exhibition within the extended field of possibilities proposed by Rosalind Krauss when she clarified how the term 'sculpture' was being used by artists by the 1970s. To do so, she mapped differently structured possibilities for artmaking between the categories of architecture and landscape, such as 'marked sites' where artists explored the possible combination of landscape plus not-landscape. Her examples of how this was done included marking a site through ephemeral means such as the use of photography as documentation, or as a record of the artist's experience.ⁱ

Phoebe's act of taking the photographs in Greenland, and the resultant images themselves, stand as markers or moments of stillness within that constant changing landscape. Each image represents a record of an elusive moment of expanded awareness of being alive in and to the reality of such a place at a particular time. Here the perception, awareness and experience of the artist is being documented, not only the place she sees.

But in what ways might photographic markers and sculptural instruments for focus resonate with a viewer in the gallery space? Does a viewer respond to specific work by changing the manner in which they look at artworks or by looking for other aspects? Writing associated with a 2009 exhibition, Alexandra Munroe refers to a group of artists she calls 'Ecstatic Minimalists', including Robert Irwin and Agnes Martin, who in the 1960s made art objects for

a focus of contemplation and perceptual experience aimed at the transformation of consciousness ... The 'pure abstraction' and reductive forms of Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, Anne Truitt, Dan Flavin and Robert Irwin shifted the conception of seeing from an optical event to a phenomenological process, and made durational time (spent looking at the object) a medium of ontological awareness—an ecstatic experience of insight.ⁱⁱ

In Phoebe's exhibition, slowed and focused looking prompted by *Resonance* may thus be carried over to *A cloud can never die: Ice, water, mist* to bring about a more contemplative and perceptual approach, and the stillness of a photograph may be mapped onto the muted geometry of the brass sculptures.

Finally, it is worth noting that both bodies of work discussed in this essay do extend across their mutual space in the gallery and towards the other visually via their reflective surfaces. The shiny brass surfaces and the expanses of glass protecting the photographs reflect transitory patches of viewers and the surrounding architecture, making unanticipated associations and sometimes complications for seeing that remind viewers of the inevitable presence and influence of environment, of context.

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ⁱ Rosalind Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* October, Vol. 8. (Spring, 1979), 30-44.

ⁱⁱ Alexandra Munroe (Editor), *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, Guggenheim Museum publications, New York, 2009, 32.



