

Natural States: three contemporary painters: Clare Woods, Ingo Meller, Daniel Sturgis
The Pier Arts Centre, Orkney 18 June – 20 August 2016

These are the facts; these are the feelings

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The natural state of a contemporary exhibition is its temporality. These paintings by Meller, Sturgis and Woods have been made elsewhere: Hereford, Stromness, London and Berlin. For sixty-three days they were shown together in the Pier Arts Centre, Orkney, (itself, one word formed by an archipelago of seventy islands) in a scheme whereby on the ground floor galleries, recent works by these three contemporary painters were shown alongside their selected work of choice of a 20th Century sculptor or and painter, drawn from the Pier Art Centre's collection of British Modernism [1]. On the upper floor, this meeting happened in reverse. Single works by Woods, Meller and Sturgis migrated to and were hosted by the collection. At the conclusion of the exhibition, the visiting works dispersed. This essay alights upon some of the conversations held in the Pier Arts Centre - between the modern and contemporary artworks, the artists themselves and the locus - aiming to anchor or free thoughts around making, site, histories, practice and reception.

How should we read or understand the two-word exhibition title? For Sturgis, the artist who curated this exhibition in dialogue with Pier Art Centre's curator Andrew Parkinson, '*Natural*' refers to the dichotomy between natural and artificial rather than over determined ideas of nature or land. For example, whilst the colour itself is enough for many of the Modernist titles from the Pier collection – '*Red and Yellow*' [2], '*Red and Blue*' [3], '*Brown, Yellow and Black*' [4] – Meller emphasises both the chemical and artificial state of the commercialized, mass market colours he uses over the romantic ideal of expensive pigment. He does not hide any aspect of what he uses. His work titles list the manufacturer's brand, given name and serial number: '*2008/6: Manganese Violet Reddish, Schveningen 190, Primary Phthalo Blue, Pebeo 11, Pewter, Winsor & Newton 511, Silver, Winsor & Newton 617, Light Red, Pebeo 32*'. In Sturgis' own works, such as his series '*Newer Older I-IV*', a formal artificial chequer board of red and white becomes the backdrop to a varied arrangement of more natural or earthen coloured circles or '*boulders*'. For Woods, who paints from black and white documentation photography, in order to have freedom of choice in the colours she selects, unmoored from their source or origin. This shift in colour is clearly seen in her split diptych of '*Barbara's Knickers*' (2015) and '*Greyscale*'. (2015). The pink flurry of '*Barbara's Knickers*', a study of Barbara Hepworth's sculpture '*Oval Sculpture (No.2)*' shifts to the scientific, dark green, otherworldly fluorescent tube lit colour scene of '*Greyscale*', the artist's second re-reading, after seeing Hepworth's sculpture in reality at the Tate.

'*State*', references to this situation or territory which can shift or change. This statement of exhibition intent also suits the Pier Arts Centre context and its collection. In the publication '*An Unfolding Gift: The Pier Arts Centre Collection*', Mel Gooding referred to the works in the collection as objects that are not '*inert*' but rather '*invested with a generative power*' [5].

Gooding locates this shifting rather than static state in their *'intrinsic quality, their particular histories in art and the casual manner of their accretion'*. [6] The latter statement refers to the way in which Margaret Gardiner (1904-2005), the collector who established and gifted her collection to the Pier, bought and acquired the work both pragmatically and joyfully. Whilst she intuitively liked an artwork, she also knew that each sale supported her friends, the artists, who were struggling financially. This movement is also apparent in the genetic make-up of the Pier's own architecture. This is a series of buildings which have in their time shifted between industry and culture, public and private, as a cooperage, a lodging, a store and youth hostel, to be transformed and established in 1979 into arts centre – designed by Patrick Heron's daughter Kate Heron and Axel Burrough – then given a further, empathetic re-reading of their taxonomy thanks to a Lottery refurbishment by Reiach & Hall in 2007. A further point in the Pier's lineage is planned, following the acquisition of the old Post office across the street, which is planned to provide a centre for *'living, making and learning'* [7]. The Pier continues to make acquisitions for the collection, so it is open-ended as an entity, of both modern and contemporary artworks, most recently through auction, Barbara Hepworth's *'Two Forms (Orkney)'* (1967) and a contemporary work by Glasgow-based Sara Barker.

In terms of *'Natural States'*, a further theme of time as a shifting entity, is important for venue, collection and for the curatorial intentions towards both the contemporary and modern works themselves. Sturgis refers to *'... the idea of painting as a discourse, being able to reach across different times and locations. Historically the idea of process, shared conversations, reflections and the fact of showing contemporary works alongside the historical'*. [8] In particular he is interested in *'... how that can complicate.'* Let us hold the word 'complicate'. Sturgis goes on to state that *'Time is held within the makings of the paintings'* and that, *'We always meet paintings in the present, even if they are very old'*. [9] Ingo Meller, who had one of Pier collection's artists, Eduardo Paolozzi, as his tutor, describes such a meeting as important in his own genesis as an artist. After graduation, when seeking a medium he could have a connection with, he 'met' a Rembrandt painting in the present, in a Berlin museum collection, where he was struck by the qualities of the paint, rather than the iconography of the painting. This analogy echoes a connection to the British Modernists relationship with land; where they sought to engage with the *'qualities'* and not *'iconography'* of landscape.

Meller goes further; to state that as a contemporary and materialistic society we have no iconography [10]. For Meller, the point of reception to his work comprises of *'facts and beauty'* – which I would like to describe with the borrowed phrase, a *'poetic economy'*. [11] His is a manifesto to bring painting back to its constituent details, involving interplay within Meller's work between the title and the appearance. He sees this reference as an economic product or as he calls it 'the material reality' of the work. The facts are illustrated in the reductive method the artist employs and the rules he has arrived at over his career by jettisoning the givens of painting through a personal history of process and choice concerning what he had or did not have relation to. [12] The artist has long since eschewed the stretcher. His canvases are adhered directly to the gallery wall. His work titles comprise of the economic product that made them and the material reality of the work is always highlighted. The actual paint colour beyond initial selection is unmixed and therefore unmediated by the artist before application. Its hue remains untainted from the tube unless it meets another on the canvas. The canvas retains its natural colour. The materiality of the paint is such that where a mixer has not been added to the paint; it does not adhere to the canvas' surface. In one, the imprint of the warp and weft of the canvas is visible upon the back of the paint, as it has rolled forward from the canvas. In another, the materiality of the paint is such that a white

mark of paint does not grip to the canvas. It only leaves its trace where the brush glides over a purple mark.

The viewer is therefore faced with the unstable nature of the actual artwork. Meller describes this point, as one where the viewer must decide to take the work as a 'value' or not. What is this work by fact and what is it by looking at it? Sturgis enjoys Meller's work as he finds it 'worrying', as it is challenging to the viewer on if it is enough. Meller describes the success of a work as '*a painting that must never look like a painting*', [13] rather, '*an organisation of colour. It has to create a quality for reception.*'

These works should be the flattest of paintings, but standing side on, the marks of the paint form crevices and step formations, like a rock face, dictated by where the paint's skin has stuck or drooped. Face on, the works act as a map of the action of their making. With the larger paintings, the strokes are the width of an arm movement. Other marks or rhythms, contain the staccato stab and drag of the brush. Meller's works have an austere beauty. The direction of the strokes can echo the warp and the weft of the canvas or on looking further outwards, the vertical, dark pillars of the harbour pier. The gravitational downward pull of the paint, the drag in particular, is strangely felt in the stomach. This gallery is elevated on a pier, with the rise and ebb of the sea around it. Meller's works are at home in this location. The simple materiality of the Pier's modern gallery architecture, in its choices to reveal and retain the bare concrete of the ceiling structure or beams, is sympathetic in its rawness of choice with Meller's aesthetic.

This notion of '*at home*' is similarly echoed by Meller's choice from the collection – the domestic scale of Margaret Mellis' humbly scaled '*Dead Anemones*' (1957). What is the shift from Mell/ER to Mell/IS? Mellis' flowers have been brought from exterior to interior, a faithful study of the true meaning of the memento mori, or still life, with its broken stem and the dead weight of the head pulling and dragging one flower down. Both Meller and Mellis' works are a study of flatness and reductive choice. The quality of Mellis' flatness is exquisite in terms of pictorial plane, colour and application of paint. Where a petal from the blue flower should be perceived as lying behind the glass, this depth is simply expressed by the 'rim' or muddy yellow ochre edge of the vase shape, overlapping that part of the blue petal. The colours meet and the double application for the concealed part of the petal becomes thicker. This intersection of colours is employed in Meller's mark-making too, where a simple layering of two colours occurs where they happen to overlap. The horizon line of water in Mellis' vase, is simply staggered, a fraction higher in its reflection of the table plane that it lies on, showing the edge of water and edge of table as one line raised. These are the facts; these are the feelings.

Like Meller, Clare Woods also studied sculpture as a student, rather than painting. Both of their understanding of sculptural language is apparent in the genetics of their painting. Woods' paintings exhibited in '*Natural States*' are primarily a reading of Barbara Hepworth's sculptures, where a curve is obtained from another given curve, or a connecting, morphing void within the material is reconsidered. This re-appropriation, marked by the shift from sculpture to paint, sees Woods reconsidering the defined weight, balance and movement of fixed material though the gravity defying language of paint. She constructs weight with one brush mark and states, '*I'm thinking of the surface and how the sculpture feels when I paint it.*' [14] Barbara Hepworth talked of such a touch:

'A chance remark by Ardini, an Italian master carver... that 'marble changes colour under different people's hands', made me decide immediately that it was not the dominance which one had to attain over material, but an understanding, almost a kind of persuasion, and above all greater co-ordination between hand and head.' [15]

Tonally, Woods paints from dark back to light. The black and white photographs that Woods paints from, come from catalogues of Barbara Hepworth's work that she has gathered over the years. Hepworth, Woods points out, had an optimum view for her sculpture and was very specific in how its optimum form should be captured carefully by the camera. In reality, there is no control over how people look at an object and move around it. In the Pier Arts Centre, this is aptly demonstrated in the relation in one of the rooms of Hepworth's *'Involute 2'* (1946) to Woods' *'Pot Bound'* (2016). In the natural light, pouring in from the gallery feature window, which overlooks the harbour, the light itself moves and shifts over the surface of the pink Ancaster stone. This means there can be no optimum view, as the edge of the sculpture shifts. In Woods' own words, *'The edge is a changing entity as you move around a sculpture. The edge is a confusion and an anxiety'*. [16] Let us hold the word 'anxiety'. As the line of the sculptural edge moves from darkness to light, so does Wood's the colour of the single brush stroke. Woods talks of the *'supremacy of the edge'*, whether that be the edge of a brushstroke, indicating that it existed in a different form, or the way she frames some of the forms, where the edge of the support intersects the edge of the form with its final reality.

There is a real physicality to Woods' paintings, which are all painted on the flat. The direction of the drips running down the sides of the aluminium and support is the give away to this, when placed on the wall. With the work in this position, Woods says that she can *'walk along the painting'*, the action of which is a kind of landscape to be *'walked'*. [17] Woods talks of *'stopping'* a mark, by using a process of stencils or masking tape, which create an abrupt oddity of edge and form within the painting. Sturgis refers to the form of her strokes as a *'swooshiness'*. This edge is most poetic in Woods' re-reading of Hepworth's *'Two Heads'* (1932), which is shown in the same small gallery with Hepworth's pencil study for this work entitled *'Two Heads (Mother and Child)'* (1932). Where the child is held and cradled by the drawn line of the mother in Hepworth's work, in Woods' version, *'The Parting'* (2016), the brush stroke of the child emanates from the mother's interior with the hard edge almost a wrench between mother and child, created where the masking tape has been placed and cut. Whilst Hepworth was drawn to the harmony of the relation of interior to exterior and its interplay, here the child is the void that comes out the woman's body, and that void is visceral in its riots of fleshy reds; more of a nod to the primeval. Woods sees this edge as exemplifying that the mother never has a static relationship with the child. Yet the eyes on this work, black dots, are like the Skara Brae Buddo's eyes, which allowed millennia ago, the whale bone to see, shifting from being an object into being a companion.

The excitement of Woods' paintings of Hepworth's sculptures taps into a different kind of emotion. At times it is bawdy and irreverent, such as the highly humorous *'Barbara's Knickers'* title. In a room, ludely put, full of holes at the Pier, there is one protrusion, with Woods' work *'A Push and a Shove'*, where the vigorous movement of the brushstroke sees a phallus-like shape being cradled by a second form, reminiscent of a pelvis. At others, the cultural reference of the title's relation to the work shifts and creates a new orientation. One of Woods' work hosted by the collection on the upper floor is entitled *'Sing me to Sleep'*, (2015). It is the re-appropriation of a Smiths' lyric, and a piece of embroidery by Woods' partner Des Hughes, re-orientating Hepworth's *'Large and Small Form'* (1934). The

domestic reference within Woods' re-reading to her partner [18], suits the Pier collection which houses other domestic partnerships such as Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson.

Woods' backgrounds, although simple, are intriguing in her works on show at the Pier and have historical references. She talks of Giacometti and Bacon as having created a frame to contain abstraction. The lines of the grid, or cage, are visible in *'Greyscale'*, where Woods has used a brush to create a pressure and mark to reveal the gesso through the painting as luminescent underneath. In *'Little Frida'* (2016), a single horizon line brush mark is made behind the singular, pierced form of Hepworth's *'Two Forms (Orkney)'* (1967), transplanting it from its original study in polished slate to a talismanic standing stone. Woods describes this form as slightly slouching or leaning back. The space between Woods' and Hepworth's works is a conversation, of two forms meeting. It is worth noting that these two works exist on different floors of the Pier Arts Centre, with Woods' painting in excess of scale of Hepworth's original study.

One of the pleasures of *'Natural States'*, whilst located in the proximity of carefully placed works, is also in the hands of the viewer, who carries the memory of certain works to the other parts of centre. Unmoored they make their own connections. Just as documentary photography gave Hepworth's sculptures their optimum view, the unique architecture of the Pier Arts Centre frames contemporary and modern works, affording long views or views through. For example, Woods' work is given the optimum view through a long view through the sequence of rooms downstairs. Mother and child can be seen iconic at the end of the long gallery, framed by a doorway. The carving out of the windows, inset with their old, thick sills also give the feeling of being held within. The curatorial choices in relation to the architecture are assured.

For *'Natural States'*, Sturgis is showing two series of works, his *'Boulder'* and *'Circle'* paintings. The bold checkers and circles of *'Newer Older'*, staggered down a corridor which opens onto a final view of the harbour, are at once highly formal and stylized in organization. Yet the circular forms within the paintings cannot help but link with the fluorescent buoys lined along the side of a fishing boat outside. Sturgis' abstract forms are not really of the natural world, but look at the relationship of abstraction to the landscape and nature; a factor he describes as a *'latent, problematic, little element'*. Sturgis began the series of circle paintings on a series of visits to Orkney, latterly making his studio, in Sylvia Wishart's (1936-2008) old place. Here the modern, contemporary and loci circles of the Venn diagram overlap, as Wishart, an Orcadian painter, sold her original studio to Margaret Gardiner, which forms one of the main buildings of Pier Arts Centre. Sturgis made the largest painting of the *'Newer Older'* series, *'Newer Older (Rackwick)'* (2015), in response to Rackwick, Hoy, where he saw giant circular boulders. In this work, the checkered background has been magnified to be inset as four main background squares in white and cream, with the edge of the pattern they form just apparent, suggesting a continuation ad infinitum beyond the frame.

Sturgis mentions, in passing, the work of Californian painter Lorser Feitelson (1898-1978) who made his boulder series in the late 1950s and 60s, imbuing the stones as biomorphic forms with psychic properties. Sturgis' own boulders do not hold any of this belief system; rather the circles meet with *'tension'*, in the idea of an edge or the possible roll of the circle out of frame. His works also engage a playful rather than spiritual element. It is almost as if Sturgis is employing a visual and verbal play on 'boulder', as in 'bolder / boulder', reminiscent of wordplay employed by one of his heroes, Ian Hamilton Finlay, quotes from Malevich's manifesto in a letter, *'No more representation of external nature, no portraiture,*

or still life - only geometric forms in seeming motion on a painterly surface'. [19] Sturgis' paintings hold with this manifesto. In sequence, as in concrete poetry, he constructs through repetition this modulation of his material, with his chosen rhetorical geometric form as the circle or 'boulder' shape, which pile up through subtle, adjusted orchestrations of differing colour ways and compositions. There are also circles within circles, where the artist plays with scale and balance. In *'Over and Above'* (2014), small circles roll along the edges of the straight-edged boulder forms, and are seen in relief of the bold, red background. They provide no relief in themselves however, as their equilibrium is unstable and vulnerable. Painted in two halves, no interior horizon line within the circle is at the same angle, or steadily horizontal, suggesting a queasy spilling or a movement like a series of portholes looking onto an unsteady sea. This movement is un-nerving because as Woods describes, Sturgis *'paints with a steady hand'*.

In terms of technique, Sturgis carefully chooses that the hand remains just visible in the paintings. He uses graphite pencil directly around certain shapes on the canvas to bring the viewer back to the fact it is not masked or machine made. Clearly, it is made rather slowly. He rollers on the white primer for ground, then uses layers of acrylic paint, applied with sable brushes. The paint is flat, certain, determined yet there is also this uncertainty. There are no brush marks and this requires the viewer to look closer and longer for subtleties, which slowly reveal themselves. On further inspection, it can be discerned that it is not one gray but several shades of gray. The colours look the same, but they are just not the same. The paintings are open and not static.

Sturgis selected Ben Nicholson's measured, balanced work *'1943 (painted relief version 2)'* to show within the conversation of his own work. This small hand painted gouache on board, is a considered pattern of flat static shapes, yet just as pictorial space is made in Sturgis' work, with the shapes, often circles, overlapping, the incision of the circle within Nicholson's work swiftly introduces a pictorial depth. The flatness and harmony revealing another layer behind. Though clearly and formally in conversation with Sturgis' work, this juxtaposition revolves around ideas of doubt, certainty and movement.

I have asked you, the reader, like a psychologist, to sit holding words that within themselves are facts, but also have associated, often difficult, feelings. These were uncomfortable words during the essay such as *'complicated'* and *'anxious'*. In the relationship of these paintings to British Modernism, are these works merely a repetition of history? Sturgis describes Woods *'as using appropriation and repainting, but that the 'action of representing them mystifies them [the image]'*. Let us metaphorically place Sturgis in the psychologist's chair. As a curator, as well as an artist, he has repeatedly chosen to show how contemporary work relates to past work, and has shown contemporary works alongside historical ones, firstly at the Wordsworth Trust, then Kettle's Yard, now at the Pier Arts Centre. He will further examine the antagonism between pure abstraction and nature in *'Against Landscape'* in 2017, an exhibition developed with Grizedale Arts. These anchor words are noted from his speech and crop up often. Sturgis calls painting *'an anxious occupation'*, due to all the past paintings that exist. *'You have to get over it or recognise one's place in tradition.'* By not denying this other, there is porosity between historical and contemporary works, between geographical places, between work and site. Yet with this porosity, comes a pleasurable complication. Each of the artists in this exhibition succinctly embraces this tenet.

Barbara Hepworth observed groups coming together. In *'Group III (Evocation)'*, (1952), again in the Pier's collection, her source was watching people gather in the volume of Piazza

San Marco, Venice. *'This thought has recurred again and again... and has developed my greater interests; the reasons why people both move differently and stand differently in direct response to changing surroundings...'*. [20]. The gathering of the work of Sturgis, Woods and Meller, with the works of the Pier Collection, including Hepworth herself, Nicholson and Mellis, alongside further Modernist works, and the architecture of the Pier Arts Centre, allows for such a conversation, to seek out new rhythms, leanings, displacements and to seek out what Hepworth coined a *'stereognostic sensibility'* [21]; the ability to discern shape and weight of an object by it touching another. [4132]

Jenny Brownrigg (2016)

Footnotes

[1] The collection compass of British Modernism includes the following marks of declination: Pier Arts Centre, Orkney; Kettle's Yard, Cambridge; and Tate St Ives, Cornwall. It should be noted that Daniel Sturgis with Martyn Simpson co-curated *'Perfidy, Surviving Modernism'*, at Kettle's Yard in 2000.

[2] *'Red and Yellow'*, Wilhelmina Barnes-Graham (1958), Pier Arts Centre Collection.

[3] *'Red and Blue'*, Terry Frost (1959), Pier Arts Centre Collection.

[4] *'Brown, Yellow and Black'*, Roger Hilton c.1958, Pier Arts Centre Collection.

[5] Essay *'Margaret's Gift'*, Mel Gooding, P.12, *'An Unfolding Gift: The Pier Arts Centre Collection'* (2010), Thames & Hudson

[6] Ibid

[7] Pier Art Centre's Director Neil Firth uses this phrase to describe the acquisition of the old Post Office. He re-frames the word 'centre' in the organisation's title, citing that the Post Office can be transformed into the centre- the *'living, making and working'* part of the organisation.

[8] Interview with Daniel Sturgis, 23.5.16, Glasgow

[9] Ibid

[10] Meller, Pre-exhibition talk, Pier Arts Centre, 17.6.16.

[11] Meller once accidentally met French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou (1926-1987) in a pub in Cologne. Filliou wrote *'Principals of Poetic Economy'* in 1970, whose manifesto was to create a new economy in opposition to a political economy. Filliou had both trained and worked as a political economist, working for the UN programme of economic development in countries such as South Korea, Egypt and Denmark. With *'Principes d'Economie Poétique'* Filliou wished to privilege *'unproductive and immeasurable concepts such as joy, desire, pleasure and life'*. [*'Robert Filliou, Génie sans talent'*, Musée d'art modern Lille Métropole, Villeneuve d'Ascq, 6 Dec 2003-28 Mar 2004, Anna Dezeuze, 'Papers of Surrealism', Issue 2 Summer 2004]

[12] Meller describes a process and series of choices which lead him to where he is as a painter: *"I start to buy oil and brush. I start to have a look, not an idea. It needs 2 years to find an idea to paint. First I paint on canvas and stretcher. I don't like that, I have no relation to it. I then paint on paper. I then stretch canvas over aluminium, which is 1.5 MM thick, very flat to wall. It is too rectangular. I have problems with it. I don't know how to go to edges. I start to cut canvas out of aluminium, but the edge frays. I don't like it. I cut linen and it becomes a form, not a rectangle any more. I start to paint not with an idea of what to paint. I take colour on the brush. What I am looking for is an organisation of colour. It has to create a quality for reception. It must never look like a painting. This was the beginning"*. Interview with artist, 16.6.16, Pier Arts Centre.

[13] Gardiner, the Pier Arts Centre's collector, said '*... I hate being called a collector, for I have never set out to collect*'. [P.17, '*The Launching of the Pier Arts Centre*', first published in the Pier Arts Centre exhibition catalogue '*The Pier Arts Gallery: The First Ten Years*', in '*An Unfolding Gift: The Pier Arts Centre Collection*'] So Meller's oxymoron of a '*painting that is not a painting*', is empathetic with a collector who is not a collector or a collection that is not a collection - Gardiner saw this as too formal word to describe the informal ways she acquired the works.

[14] Interview with the artist 16.6.16, Pier Arts Centre.

[15] Barbara Hepworth, '*Carvings and Drawings*', London: Lund Humphries & Co Ltd, (1952).

[16] Interview with the artist 16.6.16, Pier Arts Centre.

[17] Woods has chosen to show her more domestic scaled works for this exhibition. She often works to a scale that could rival any architecture.

[18] Des Hughes has further translated Woods' work '*A Push and a Shove*' and '*The Parting*', providing a third re-reading of Hepworth and Woods' work, returning it into a sculpture for Woods and Hughes' exhibition '*The Sleepers*' (2016) at Pallant House Gallery.

[19] Kasimir Malevich, "*From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915*," in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt (New York: Viking, 1976), 116-35. '*The Deep Minimalism of Ian Hamilton Finlay*', Marjorie Perloff, *The Battersea Review: Quote from 'Letter to Pierre Garnier, September 17th, 1963'*, in Mary Ellen Solt, '*Concrete Poetry: A World View*', Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1971. <http://thebatterseareview.com/critical-prose/170-marjorie-perloff-on-finlay>

[20] P.18, Barbara Hepworth, '*Carvings and Drawings*', London: Lund Humphries & Co Ltd, (1952).

[21] Ibid.