

Writing without words...

Thoughts on *Schatten haschen* an exhibition of works by Barbara Beyer, Marie-Thérèse Ross and Sayako Sugawara at Swiss Cottage Library.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates discusses the merits of the invention of writing by saying the following:

“For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding...”

It would perhaps be fair to expect that words, writing and books should all feature heavily in an exhibition staged in a library, but while the works on display are all united by a concern for record and memory, this is not an exhibition which prioritises words. Instead, Barbara Beyer, Marie-Thérèse Ross and Sayako Sugawara present works which investigate the materials and processes involved in the capture of fleeting memories. As if in agreement with Socrates' distrust of writing, all three of the artists in this exhibition are concerned with how materials themselves, instead of words, can carry memory.

The show's title, *Schatten haschen*, is a phrase borrowed from a book found on the 'free book swap shelf' of the Swiss Cottage Library Café. Translated from the German as 'snatching shadows', this happenstance snippet of text was amongst the pages of a book *Das goldene Geschichtenbuch* published at the beginning of the 20th century and which must have fled with its owners from Germany in the 1930s or 40s. This title, like the serendipitous nature of the book's journey and discovery, evokes the drive to fix that which is in constant flight.

Most literally, the show's title reflects the practice of **Sayako Sugawara**, whose work often captures the shadows cast by objects placed on photosensitive papers. *Stones* is a body of work derived from a collection of carefully selected pebbles and rocks that Sugawara has gathered over time and which she uses as a vocabulary of forms. These are displayed alongside a series of cyanotype photograms registering the shadows cast from each rock, which has been allowed to inscribe a reflection of itself onto photographic paper. By displaying both the rocks and their prints side-by-side, Sugawara presents us with the logic of writing: showing us both the signified – the rock – and the signifier - its captured shadow. In her work *(Copy) 80. The Schwarze Mönch*, Sugawara creates a series of implied landscapes which consists of grids of A3 black and white photocopies. These images emerged in the process of printing, enlarging, re-photographing, and finally photocopying glass plate negatives and magic lantern slides which were found by the artist wrapped in newspaper in a cardboard box in a school's darkroom. These discarded, forgotten and then subsequently found objects are historic photographic records of the Swiss Alps and English countryside that are made to speak again. These images accumulated and recorded the passing of time and the processes involved in their making. Scratches, dust, and creases merge in the present form of these abstracted landscapes whilst speaking of their past. Their final process in becoming artwork on the gallery wall took place in the library itself, where Sugawara used the in-house photocopier to produce the final prints, branding the images with striping from the

scanning device, the deep black of the photocopier ink and the identifiable marks and scratches on the photocopier's glass bed.

The library – a space of record keeping and memory storing – was also used as a space for art making by **Barbara Beyer**. Working across sculpture and ceramics, her practice is concerned with the process of its own making. The large abstract drawings *One by One* are composed of a myriad series of repetitive charcoal marks made on paper laid on the library floor which echo the repetitiveness and abstract nature of an alphabet. These marks sit between drawing and writing, evoking black type on the white page but recognisable as neither text nor picture. Instead, they are both images and records of the charcoal being allowed to inscribe itself on the sheet. These marks were all made using, and exhausting, a single stick of charcoal made by Beyer herself. The drawing tools used to make these images also belong to another body of work *Making Stepping Stone Bridges*, which consists of ceramic vessels the artist has made in order to produce these charcoal sticks. These quiver-like earthenware structures were filled with gathered twigs, then fired in an outdoor kiln to produce these basic and ubiquitous tools for mark-making. Beyer's use of charcoal is not the only instance in which she explores the relationship between art and writing; other works on display also use the historical materials of written language; slates echo the historic surfaces of the blackboard while marks pressed into clay echo the cuneiform script on tablets.

The library as a space for making art, along with a concern for the previous lives of the materials of art, are also integral to the practice of **Marie-Thérèse Ross**. Working with sculpture, drawing and print making, Ross' work repurposes scraps of wood which have lived other lives. *Fragile Birdsong* uses wood sourced from found timber and discarded furniture, including bookshelves from her parents' home. Creating a vocabulary of wooden shapes which are strung on wire like notes on a stave or words on a line, these malleable sculptures can be reconfigured into different forms. In the same way that words can be rearranged to create a range of sentences, the mobility of these linear sculptures allow the possibility of their morphing into new forms and meanings. As with other works in this exhibition, Ross has used the library as a resource and space for making. *Collection of Shadows* is a concertina book whose pages have been filled with drawings found and selected amongst the pages of books in the library. She often selects images of birds and other natural forms to draw from; avian creatures being a recurrent subject throughout her work. *Gentle Feathered Voice* and *Darkness Will Sing Like A Bird*, for example, belong to a group of sculptures of crows and ravens. Painted in black and eschewing naturalism and detailing, they are described by Ross not as sculptures of the birds, but sculptures of their shadows. Crafted in wood and recycled timber, they give weight and permanence to the fleeting nature of their subject.

The shadows and memories implied and captured in *Schatten haschen* are both concerned with, and imbedded in, the materials Barbara Beyer, Marie-Thérèse Ross and Sayako Sugawara choose to work with. All the works on display manage to remind us of the strategies, purposes and materials of writing while doing so without the use of actual words. To return to Socrates' distrust of writing; what unites the works in this show is the absence of words. All three artists safeguard memories by allowing the materials they use to produce - unmediated by the written text - 'characters' which are in fact 'part of themselves'.

Aliki Braine, May 2024