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Marl Hole

Airspace, Stoke-on-Trent
3 - 31 October 2009

Reviewed by: Stacey Booth

The concept of Marl Hole was to challenge the traditional ideas and methods that have been applied to clay, and demonstrate a fresh approach to the material whilst using very primitive techniques.

Neil Brownsword, Alexandra Engelfriet, Torbjørn Kvasbø, Johnny Magee and Pekka Paikkari joined forces to make this work possible. The artists visited Etruria Marl located in Staffordshire to embark on both a physically and mentally challenging task, to manipulate the landscape in order to create interventions which demonstrated the history and relationship between the creator and the material. Over a period of just five days, each artist was confronted with the material in its rawest state and had to decide in what way they would alter the landscape to create their piece of work.

The event was filmed by Johnny Magee which clearly shows the strength and determination of the five artists as well as the exhaustion they face along the way. The sheer scale of the Etruria Marl is daunting enough, but despite that the artists successfully created their work whilst enduring the elements and having limited resources.

Johnny Magee's manages to capture the emotions and thoughts that the artists experience throughout his filming and this is achieved by focusing on the struggles and exertion that takes place. If the film were to solely focus on the finished pieces, then the purpose of the project would have been lost. It is only when you see the individuals using parts of their bodies to manipulate the clay and the sheer force needed to do it, that you start to appreciate the work on the level that it is intended. The exhaustion felt by the artists is sympathetic to the past workers of the pottery industry by both demonstrating the back breaking work that they would undertake daily and scale of the industry at the time. The fact the Etruria Marl exists from the now extinct pottery industry and that it looked so desolate and empty despite its vastness before the artists arrived; symbolises with the death of the industry and the large hole it has left within the area and its community.

As well as the film was the installation of an interactive clay wall that allowed visitors to touch and manipulate the clay in whatever way they wanted. This was very popular with children visiting the gallery and allowed them to experience the feel of the material as well as creating some of their own works of art above the clay wall. I felt this was an important aspect to the exhibition as the viewers could touch the clay to get a sense of what the artists were feeling and what it was like to use the material.

A striking contrast to the clay wall was the bed of clay that sat opposite the wall. Alexandra Engelfriet created a performance which involved manipulating the clay with only her body and the aid of water to wet the clay. This was very intense as she recreated the techniques used in the Marl Hole film. To be confronted with what you had viewed on a screen and to see how the material reacted in the flesh certainly put things into perspective. Even though the area of the clay which she was manipulating was on a minute scale compared to the quarry, you realise just how exhausting working with such a material in this way is. As the clay become wet and sticky, Alexandra had to fight with the material to free herself ready for her next move. As the performance progressed you could see the fatigue consuming her as well as the material covering more and more of her body resulting in an epic struggle; again symbolising with the pottery industry and the struggles which it faced in its later years being consumed by capitalism and eventually being exported abroad to allow greater profits.

Over all I felt the exhibition was a great success. The aim of the exhibition to confront the traditional idea of clay and its purpose was certainly achieved as well as symbolising the history and industry of the area. Hopefully this will give new hope to the area by presenting

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...the potential of ceramics in the art industry and recapture the enthusiasm of the material that was once felt whilst the Pottery Industry was still thriving.

Writer detail:

Stacey Booth - Contemporary Fine Artist

Venue detail:

[Airspace](#)

AirSpace, No4, Broad Street, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire ST1 4HL

www.airspacegallery.org/2007/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1 

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