

Catalyst Review

Christopher Collier

Catalyst, 7th -21st March 2009, The Old Tannery Temporary Art Space/Yr Hen Taneri Gofod Celf Dros Dro, Museum of Modern Art, Wales.

Blaengar & Framework/Fframwaith

It is difficult to know where to place this show, lying as it does somewhere between exhibition, site-specific response and event. The work however, though the output of disparate and geographically dispersed artists, creates a deceptively unified response to the impressive building that houses it.

Opened by artist, writer and broadcaster Osi Rhys Osmond with a typically lyrical speech in which he contextualised the work, the show is an ephemeral affair that forms the first full scale exhibition to be held at this, the Old Tannery building behind the Museum of Modern Art Wales in Machynlleth. A show as intrepid and forward looking in its posturing and intentions as this forms an ambitious start for this new temporary exhibition space and one that is not without risk. The Tannery space is embarking upon a programme of events facilitated by Pete Telfer of Culture Colony before the space is redeveloped into an extension of MOMA Wales' gallery but the risks here are inherent in the nature of the work on show, encapsulated rather neatly in the very name of one of the participating groups: Blaengar (in English - progressive, pro-active, cutting edge). This work, very much of the moment, both intrigues but often confounds in its fragile and transient nature, often delicate but likewise often stark. Along with its largely transitory ambience, the show appears often so integrated with the space that houses it as to seem to be almost growing organically from the very walls themselves until indeed it becomes difficult to judge where space ends and work begins. It is certainly lives up to the 'cutting-edge' tag and marks a challenging departure from the traditional media usually housed within main the MOMA building. It confidently proclaims ambitious intentions and future promise both for the space and for the young artists participating. Not just the title of the show 'Catalyst', but the works themselves suggest that this could be just the beginning of something: something dynamic and unpredictable, exciting and frustrating, ambitious and enthralling. At the heart of the inherent contrasts and contradictions but also of the invigorating chemistry of the show lies the fact that this is a courageous collaboration, a collaborative effort between Blaengar and Framework. Blaengar are a loose collective of contemporary inter-disciplinary artists organising site-specific events in Mid Wales whilst Framework, a Swansea based group of similarly diverse, multi-discipline artists work through live and participatory art, video and installation. Despite the eleven contributing artists working out of differing groups, with differing concerns and out of differing geographical areas the show hangs together surprisingly well. Perhaps we have the venue to thank for that, one gets the feeling that the space of the Old Tannery building is as much a presence here as the work itself, heavily informing and working in unison with the artwork. Despite the challenges of working in a space like this the work holds together and refuses to be overwhelmed, indeed there seems to be some strange alchemy at work here that creates an effect that is more than the sum of its parts. The challenges of the space are far outweighed by the sheer inspirational grandeur of this impressive old building with an atmosphere that can't help but leach through the work that attempts to fill it.

Owen Griffith's waxy forms climb the expansive wall of the building, almost appearing to grow like fungus from the cracks in the masonry – their vivid and warm orange colouring

blooming hopefully out from the dimly lit and cold surroundings. They dance in a dizzying procession up the wall, at once out of place but yet fully integrated with their surroundings, they appear almost grown as much as made.

Alice Brigg's lace installation *Entrance/Mynedfa* again appears to be emerging from the building, a part of the space itself, again delicately exploring the tension of being simultaneously integrated and yet incongruous. The fragility of the lace amongst the heavy stone and metal ghosts of former industry recalls her earlier work 'Dressing Floor' at Llywernog. The piece works with its site-specific context to suggest a profound melancholy of abandonment and emptiness. It harmonises rather well with its neighboring work, Phillipe Murphy's hanging paper cut-out installation of Capel Celyn, a piece that works as much from its absences as from its presence. Here the outlines of the lost village are faintly traced, cut from the fabric of the paper in a stark act of removal, the disturbingly implied erasure of a potential history, of culture and language, that leaves a sense of emptiness and void behind. The exquisitely cut paper recalls the lace of Alice Briggs' work visually whilst the sense of loss and desertion echoes it emotionally. These stand, in the words of Rossetti as "a moment's monument", quietly standing in for things that have been lost or left behind.

It is this interplay between presence and absence, work and surrounding space that informs much of the other work. Blue McAskill's understated piece *Box Me* for instance seems as much an examination of empty space as it does of form or supposed content. Likewise, Alys Owen's suspended installation hangs, caught like a fly in a cobweb, between opposing spaces: the realms of the decorative and the functional, the agricultural and the industrial. It appears to hover between potential and realisation, ideals and reality, life and death. This feeling of an object caught between two places is compounded by the fact that this is the first piece to greet you as you arrive, appearing to hang as a bridge between the stark chiaroscuro of the Tannery space and the dull, soft gloom of the evening outside.

The idea of being between two places is one that also haunts the work of Ffion Rhys, *Conversations in transit*. Her video works explore the state of mind of someone while travelling, the evocative imagery of perpetually disappearing landscapes punctuated with a soundtrack of seemingly overheard scraps of conversation, often about places the speaker has been, and the places they are going. Nostalgic and confessional, again there is a sense of transience and memory that drifts through the piece, glowing as it does out of the soot black shadows of the space in a luminescent square, lingering like an image burnt onto the back of your eye.

Christopher Collier's imposing work *Europa (Gwartheg y Llyn)* also seems to deal with ideas of transience. Its bleached bull skull hangs garlanded in fragile and brief narcissi, its lacy backing, again with echoes of Alice Brigg's and Phillipe Murphy's work, resonates with spiritual references and recalls the Mari Lwyd lifting the work to an uncanny, almost ethereal, place. At the same time its use of sturdy oak, steel and its straw surround plants it firmly back in the moment, in the barn-like space of the Tannery. Nestling, almost hidden amongst the straw sits a discarded milk bottle spilling its pale contents out onto the concrete, alluding to the wider sense of loss and evanescence that permeates the space.

The show's other video installation containing work from Adele Vye and Fern Thomas evokes similar responses, the haunting image of an owl in slow-motion flight, a figure struggling to pull a heavy load across a deserted landscape again recalling a journey, a certain transience and a feeling of being between spaces. The iconic image of the lone figure pulling forward the heavy load suggests a memorable analogue for many of the

show's concerns and those of the artists on display – fighting stubbornly to make its way into the future, struggling with the burdens of memory, dislocation and a troubled history of loss and marginalisation that gives this work a particularly Welsh feel. It is a show that is unswervingly contemporary in its approach, unapologetically Welsh in its context but universal in its concerns. Like Wales itself it is still intimate, haunted by memories from the past but paradoxically incredibly forward looking and with sizeable aspirations.