Celia Gerard: ASCENT/DESCENT

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The shape of Celia Gerard's studio is akin to an isosceles triangle whose apex has been leveled. It is a slightly irregular shape, but with a door on one end, a window at the other and a set of walls connecting base to foregone-tip, its geometric irregularity recedes beneath the structural logic of a building within which this little polygon fits neatly. When I imagine an image generated by changes in the layout of this building—small studios merging; larger ones being subdivided—I see fluctuating spatial relationships defined within a set of unchanging parameters. Older forms become ghosted beneath newly constructed arrangements that arise as they are needed. There is a natural order that underlies this apparent chaos; the question is how does one find that natural order? How does a person cultivate the ability to see the logical operations that give shade and shape to what may otherwise appear tangled and arbitrary?

Celia Gerard's artistic practice is grounded in this kind of search and her procedural basis—regimented and systematic—is engineered towards the experience of discovery. In Gerard's drawings, the process of construction and erasure that ultimately leads to a highly nuanced geometric coordination is made visible. One sees the final composition, and at the same time, the choices by which Gerard arrived there: her destination and journey pressed into a single visual arrangement.

This kind of practice is built on the type of looking that comes naturally to seekers of all variety. It is active and mindful observation, full of intent and near to the experience of contemplation. This way of seeing draws heavily on one's insight and, by extension, encourages intuitive association. When I give myself over to studying the details of Gerard's work, to becoming a seeker myself, certain mental operations fire into action. Intuition leads directly to imagination. My sense of wonder is stimulated, but so too is my analytic mind, probing and cataloguing. To my eyes Gerard's work accomplishes a rare double action. It is developed through steady, calibrated technical decisions that eventually accumulate into an image that speaks to the embrace of understanding arrived at without any need for reason or proof.

Gerard favors very strong paper for her drawings because it needs to withstand a great deal of her touch, which can be as aggressive as it is gentle. Consequentially, they are works of great tactility

and sensuality. Her exploration of bronze and ceramics is rooted in the same hands-on curiosity that is the foundation of these drawings. The plate-sized ceramics are each a unique response to the same question: what happens when I try this? They are cast from the same mold but Gerard has used a variety of clay bodies—porcelain, earthenware, T1—and glazed each piece differently. They seem to float on the wall, almost rising against the pull of gravity.

Gerard's bronze sculptures embody an opposing sensibility; some are dark and heavy, scarred, pockmarked and pitted like the weather-beaten anchor of an old ship. These pieces also bring to mind the slag that remains after a coal fire, or a growth of chaga upon a birch tree. But of course Gerard's bronzes are not meant to represent any of these things. They are resolutely abstract—like her drawings and ceramics—and in that sense attend to a discourse that long ago departed from the merely representational. It is a discourse between a creator and her material that is concerned with essential formal ideals such as balance, harmony and rhythm. Kandinsky worked in this manner. So did Agnes Martin. These artists sought to express the intrinsic qualities of their art, to create visual structures that would resonate on a level beneath the system of words that comprise our languages. It is not easy. Martin destroyed much of what she made.

It is also easy to be misunderstood: for a long time critics identified Martin's compositions with rows of crops and textiles—because one can point to a visual resemblance—despite the fact that Martin herself did not make that association. As I walked down the narrow hallway from Gerard's studio to the elevator, I wondered if I was making a similar mistake, connecting her aesthetic configurations with architectural space. But I wasn't wrong. Insofar as Gerard's work achieves a state of equilibrium amidst its many parts, there will always be congruence between her abstractions and the ideals of constructed space, be it a building, a borough or a city. The danger is thinking that such a relationship in anyway explains the work. It does not. It only proves that her abstractions are very deeply in tune with how we create the places we inhabit.