

Art as a 'science of devotion'

'Chaos' theory has been attractive to numerous artists over the last two decades or, more precisely, since the publication of James Gleick's book on the subject*. Since its argument seems to be that order exists where we customarily see only chaos or at best randomness, it appeals to a deep seated belief in many of us, that either a divine or a higher intelligence is the author of our world. It should not, therefore, be so surprising that we feel compelled to find the proof. The idea of a world, a cosmos even, structured in every particular from the macrocosmic to the sub-atomic and in the territories of the visible and the invisible is both comforting and inspiring, no less to the artist's imagination than to the scientist's.

Ece Clarke is certainly captivated by the sense of concealed order and she is familiar with Gleick's book. She is also, in her way, a compiler of evidence. To talk with her is to appreciate how wide ranging her interests are and that they embrace the discoveries of science as readily as the conventions of Fine Art practice. But an artist is what she is, not a scientist, so she will struggle to give visual expression to things which in themselves we cannot see but whose existence is inferred by science and otherwise experienced in the life-force that fuels all curiosity, all appetite for action creative or otherwise.

The earliest examples of Clarke's work that I know, were set within pictorial or at least two-dimensional frames of reference – but their defining characteristic was less a concern with pictorial representation than with formal complexity. Ostensibly, they represented natural form, in plants, the flow patterns of water or air currents; in the textures of surface – sand, rock, bark, skin etc. But what really seemed to define their subject matter was the idea of something concealed within or beyond the distractions of appearance – the identity perhaps behind the fingerprint? Of course this artist would not be alone in her fascination with complexity. One can find it for example in countless drawings of convoluted drapery in the sketchbooks of Italian Renaissance artists, and though their frequent occurrence may suggest only exercises in virtuosity, perhaps they were never so innocent. It may be that the preoccupation of Western culture with the complex, in both form and concept, reflects our deep sense of exclusion from some great secret, symptomatic in the myths of Eden, the Holy Grail, dreams of enlightenment. So, we dig the earth, we magnify and analyse its substance, we search the deserts and jungles of the world with apparently well defined objectives but we remain at the service of an ulterior and undeclared motive. This compelling intuition, the promise of some revelation that seldom takes place, can of course be as much a source of anger and frustration as of wonder or faith, a curse as much as a guiding star to the human enterprise, but we seem to have no choice other than to persist in the search.

Clarke's drawings then were never conventionally pictorial, but rather, the evidence of a meditative process, where the densely marked surface might become first and foremost an image of its own making, rather than a reference to something else; a map for an unknown destination. With that in mind, it is less surprising that much as the conventional world-map relates to the spherical globe, these two-dimensional drawings should, in the process of handling, have been turned in on themselves to produce the cylinders or scrolls which are currently so central to her practice and which both intensify its metaphoric life and increase the scope of its physical authority. By the simple action of closing the plane into a cylinder, part of the surface is made always invisible – a dark side of the moon; no face presented is ever definitive, and the combination of cylinders allows, by rotation, almost infinite variation on the same themes. When they are shelved and stacked in sufficient numbers they assume the gravitas of an archive, composed not of verbal text but of material effects; the natural world expressing its own condition, always dynamic and infinitely diverse: sea-spray, sand-storm, storm beach, mud flat, coral reef, flood plain, glacier, starlight, day-glare, snowflake etc etc. The spirit informing this project is akin to that of the 'monadists' – what the writer Robert Macfarlane calls the 'fearsome concentrators' (on the unitary nature of matter and the dynamics that activate its potential). In his book 'The Wild Places' Macfarlane speaks exactly the language of Ece Clarke's fascination with the overview, and a belief in the interconnectedness of all things. Describing the shingle peninsulas of the Suffolk coast of England he says:

"There is an exquisite patterning to the structure of these spits. They organise themselves in designs so large that they are best witnessed from the vantage of a falcon or an airman. At Dungeness, the shingle is arranged into giant floreate blooms. Orford(Ness) forms itself in long parallel ridges, each of which marks a time when a storm cast up thousands of tonnes of gravel along the shore and fattened the spit. These ridges are the stone equivalents of growth rings in a tree trunk. Aerial images of Blakeney show it to possess the complex beauty of a neuron: the long stem of the spit, and to its leeward a marshland that floods and emerges with every tide – a continually self-revising labyrinth of channel and scarp."

Clarke's cylinders are the scrolls or volumes of an archive in the making though their utility is available only to the imagination. Collectively they *evoke* rather than document the dynamics of material processes in so far as these are stimuli both to our senses and, by extension, our psychological condition. When the scrolls are partially unrolled and aligned side by side, the wave pattern that results seems to disclose what are successive mindscapes rather than 'landscapes' – expressions of subjective experience coming *after* the fact. The small stud-magnets which 'lock' the edges in place and which hold one open 'script' against another are doing more than just a practical job, they are consistent with the themes of endless making and unmaking to the extent that they introduce an active charge of energy into the structure. This in its turn reinforces the possibility of alternative alignments and suggests the scrolls' availability (within the constraints of careful handling) for private communing and consultation. It is the metaphor of a scientific project and for a site of accumulated evidence.

In celebrating the work of Ralf Bagnold, author of 'The Physics of Blown Sand and Desert Dunes' (published 1941), Robert Macfarlane suggests that:

"The massive accumulation of minute particulars... could not have been more appropriate to his subject. This was science as devotion. Information for Bagnold was not a way to summarise and therefore reduce or close down the desert landscape, but instead, a way to make it more astonishing. Science for him refined the real into a greater marvellous ness."

Ece Clarke is also an obsessive accumulator of particulars, minute or otherwise. She is a devotee of the creative life and in her way, a searcher after 'truth'. She is not a scientist, though she reflects poetically on scientific method. She would, I think, be entirely happy at the prospect of her own practice compounding rather than dispelling the mystery and wonder of the 'real'.

Tony Carter, January 2008

* James Gleick 'Chaos' pub. Heinemann 1988