

'BREAKING DOWN PRE-CONCEPTIONS'
Simon Watney interview with Ece Clarke,
London, January 2008

Ece Clarke is an artist who works on paper in a variety of media. The initial impact of much of her recent work is sculptural, largely because she chooses to roll up individual painted sheets into column-like cylinders, which are displayed in a variety of horizontal and sometimes vertical combinations. In some ways they resemble rows of mysterious rolled carpets, or sacred objects in a shrine. Each sheet is densely and richly textured, sometimes metallic in appearance, at other times viscous. She also frequently uses smoke to great effect, creating forms which can range from shimmering cloud-like transparency to areas of intense and brooding darkness. There is a strong narrative sense in much of her work, but it is a narrative of purely formal visual elements rather than of story-telling or description. One senses an artist who suppresses her own ego in order to let the work compose itself, who cherishes the accidental and allows it to guide her rather than imposing her own will on it. Each work has its own autonomy, released and given form like a genie from a bottle by her determined energy. I spoke with her recently in her London studio:

S.W. Where did you grow up and what are your earliest strong visual memories?

E.C. My earliest memories are divided between two countries – Germany and Turkey. My memories from Germany are set against a grey background, similar to Kiefer's work, with deep primary colours in the foreground on things like the well-made toys of the kindergarten. From Turkey, I have a strong memory of being in the car with my parents approaching the border from Bulgaria. As you cross the border Turkish music suddenly starts on the radio – very exciting – a signal that I was returning to my own culture, and a foretaste of things to come. And in the background were sunflower fields against a clear sky, yellow and blue, receding endlessly into the distance.

S.W. Were there any other artists in your family?

E.C. My mother had a cousin from the art academy (Yilmaz Yüzgeç) who introduced my uncle (Niyazi Toptoprak) to painting. He was always there as I grew up, and it was he who first got me into painting. He is still working as an artist and has had over a hundred exhibitions since 1969. Looking back now I can also see my mother's influences in my more recent work. She is a multi-talented artist and has done work in stained glass, embroidery, sewing, painting and so on.

S.W. When did you begin to paint?

E.C. I always had access to brushes, paper, paint, and other materials. When I was 17 my uncle let me finish one of his paintings. I felt very confident and I never stopped after that. My early work was mainly illustrative – in pastels and oils. This was the subject of my exhibitions in Istanbul during 1980's. But somehow the idea of creating illusions on canvas or paper became less satisfying and about 10 years ago I realised that for me form was as important as colour.

S.W. Do you draw or use a camera?

E.C. Drawing and photography have different functions for me and serve different purposes. Sometimes I draw, sometimes I use a camera. My drawings and photographs are part of a process of gathering information and developing my ideas – means rather than an ends in themselves. These days my drawings are part of a process of developing my ideas around texture and form – I spend a lot of time drawing, most of which are never used or shown – they are often intuitive and I let them develop in their own way.

S.W. Where did you study?

E.C. I studied in Germany and Istanbul and more recently took an MA in Fine Arts in London at the City & Guilds School of London Art School.

S.W. Tell me something about your experience as an art teacher.

E.C. I have taught both languages and art. In my experience it doesn't matter what you are teaching – you are the person with experience and access to the subject and your role is to develop the ideas and understanding of another person.

My aim as a teacher was to find the right way to reach a student – which can only be done if you understand the student well and can see what will work for that person. Every student has their own way of perceiving and their own potential. You have to understand how to present a subject effectively to the student. Then progress comes much more quickly and easily. I find this very satisfying, which is why I have always loved teaching.

S.W. Are there any artists with whom you feel a particular affinity, or poets or other creative people?

E.C. There are many artists I could mention and the list is very varied. Rembrandt - for the depth of darkness that he created in his work and the texture of his whites. Rothko for the power and presence of his paintings - its hard to explain why I feel so strongly about his work, but it is very important to me. Kiefer has such a strong bond with the past – it captures something of my memories of early life in Germany – the greys and the textures – without regard for rules. And others – Richard Serra, and James Turrell for example

S.W. Your work is very much concerned with the quality of surfaces. Where do you think this comes from?

E.C. I am more interested in things that are tangible - things that are real rather than just illusions. The surface is the first step away from a one-dimensional stage to three dimensions. It helps to create the depth within my work and to connect it to the outside world.

S.W. When did you start working on cylindrical forms?

E.C. I was always interested in different physical solids such as spheres and other elliptic forms, and became fascinated with the mathematical sign for eternity. If you look at this as the end of a three-dimensional form, then it would be the end of two cylinders – and it started from there. I found that using cylindrical forms served several purposes. The joining of the two ends of a single sheet to form a cylinder brings the beginning and the end into the same place – creating a very different physical form – three dimensional rather than two - and creates an inner space within the cylinder and outer space. As a result of making this form, it is no longer possible to perceive all of the surface at once – part will always remain hidden from the observer. This helps the works to be objects with their own identity and presence, and also to break down the viewer's expectation of the work as a representation of something else.

S.W. How do you set about combining individual elements into groups?

E.C. Every piece is made independently. After several pieces have been completed I lay them on the floor and see whether there are any natural combinations. I don't set out to make a series by trying to develop new pieces to match one another. That is why there is no guarantee that a combination will occur. Sometimes the first time you match them you know it is right – there is no need to try again. But sometimes they don't get on so well. So I have many pieces left over which don't match into a group. They are waiting for their turn – if there is one.

S.W. Is your work always intended to be displayed against the wall?

E.C. Not necessarily. I have exhibited free-standing cylinders in the past and plan to do the same in my next exhibition. However, most of them will be set on aluminium panels, which will be hung on the wall.

S.W. What do you like about print-making, and how does it relate to your paintings?

E.C. There is a physical element to my work which is important for me. The effort that I put in to working the materials is part of developing a relationship with them. Although print-making and painting are not the same from the point of view of process, I put a tremendous amount of effort into working the materials into the paper when I am painting. The materials are pressed into the surface, in a way that is similar to the force applied by the printing press if not more so. In both cases the materials enter the paper and become part of its structure.

Just as I don't follow any particular rules when I am painting, I also break many rules in print-making. I can't print more than 4 or 5 times from some of the plates that I create because of their softness.

S.W. Tell me about your studio. Do you listen to music when you are working?

E.C. I have already explained that my idea of transforming flat surfaces into cylinders goes back several years. It is an interesting coincidence that when I moved into my current studio in London, I found an enormous Victorian gas works in front, with a huge storage cylinder across the road outside my window. As you can imagine, my studio is full of cylinders – and sometimes it seems like the gas works is an extension of my studio.

I like to listen to music when I am painting, but I can't have music playing when I am developing combinations. Somehow this requires silence. For a long time, while I was listening to Rachmaninov, my work mainly consisted of swirls. At the moment I am listening to requiems, especially Mozart's. If I don't feel very deeply emotional I like to listen to Kalinnikov. When I listen to Turkish music by musicians like Dede Effendi and Hacı Arif I get completely different emotions.

S.W. You often use scorching and smoke in your works. What does fire mean to you?

E.C. My work is strongly involved with transformation – taking materials and turning them into something else. There is an important boundary between the materials as they are and the thing that they become as the work develops. Fire represents another boundary – involving a radical change in materials into a completely different formless state. I find that boundary very interesting and have been experimenting with what happens at the edge – just before a complete transformation occurs.

Fire and smoke, and the universal shapes that they contain, have always been very secretive and magical for me. They are fundamental elements of nature – and my interest in fractal shapes and naturally occurring forms has led me to work with these wild elements, seeking to capture them on paper as part of my work.

This is an area I am still exploring, and I am not sure where it will take me at this point.

S.W. How do you know when a piece is finished?

E.C. It is clear to me when a painting is finished – when the depth and the light have developed to the right extent and the balance feels right. Of course, some may need varnish, others don't – it is a very instinctive relationship that I have with the paper and the work, and hard to explain.

When setting up individual components into a sequence, there is never a finishing point. Every time I work on them, and as new paintings are completed, there are other ways to put them together. This process is only likely to be finished when the works are exhibited, as that is probably my last chance to decide on the right combination, unless there is another setting at a subsequent exhibition of course.

S.W. Which responses to your work have given you most pleasure?

E.C. I feel happy when people are captured by the colours and texture, the depth and mystery within the work, and share some of the excitement I have experienced – that is very satisfying. It is normally the people who don't ask what the work means who have made the most direct connection with the work as it is – as an object in its own right – and that is very important for me. Of course people are often interested in how the work is done and what it is made from, and they are often surprised when they are told that it is made from paper rather than leather or metal. It is helpful to break down people's pre-conceptions.