

Cake Walk 1996

Berwick Ramparts Project: The gunpowder magazine

Text by Charles Esche

To approach Elisabeth Ballet' work in Berwick is at once to become involved in the process the artist went through to make the work. The walk to the gunpowder magazine lead along the old fortress walls where the grass grows long and people walk their dogs. The view over the North Sea is distraction enough and art can easily seem superfluous Ballet was drawn to the gunpowder magazine because it marked out a space apart. It is a sunken rectangle within the ramparts closed on all sides and with an house-like structure in the centre. From within the sunken area all views disappear and four rough stone walls provide a very close horizon. The gunpowder magazine, a low stone block closed by copper doors at either end, provides the only activity. Inside the structure, a dark corridor leads directly from one door to the other – there is nothing to find inside.

This quietness is exactly what at Ballet searches for. She seeks to claim attention for spaces that are often ignored. By creating a bright blue, artificial floor amidst the rich green of the ramparts, the magazine immediately becomes exceptional. Rather like the white space of the gallery which permits the artist' work to be seen without distraction, Ballet's intervention allows the viewer to contemplate the magazine with fresh eyes and to bring this attention to the whole existing environment. The preparation of the floor isolates the gunpowder magazine, displacing its original military function and suggesting a potential ready-made for which the floor acts as an outsize plinth. Through the simple act of re-flooring the relationship between inside and outside, gallery and public space is altered. To walk on the blue floor is both physically and mentally a different experience from the grass which one again heightens awareness. The journey through the magazine itself becomes a penetration of an even more internal space with intimations of privacy invaded or disturbed. The journey proceeds from light to dark to light again and the brightness of the blue floor emphasises the physical and mental transition which the work invites us to undertake.

Art today often makes as much demand on the skills and faculties of the viewer as the artist. The audience has become a collaborator in determining significance and some work relieves almost entirely on the complicity of the viewer to achieve its effect. For Elisabeth Ballet this situation enriches her work but it is not its determining factor. She is essentially a sculptor with a commitment to a 360 degree language of mass and form. This places her a little to one side in the discourse around current art. To be concerned with the aesthetics of space is not fashionable at the moment, through the decline in overtly political art might be the herald of a return to discussion around what we might call "beauty".

Beauty is a very problematic concept for artists now but it is essential to Ballet's work. Rightly so the idea of the "good eye" has been exposed as a device to maintain the status of a patrician educated elite. Certainly aesthetics should have nothing to do with taste, inherited sophistication and the like. However, there remains a need to acknowledge art's effect on the our non-verbal emotional and intellectual comprehension, on doing this, a "language" of formal devices is built up and we look for these recognisable patterns (perhaps whether we want to or not) when we look an art. This is to say nothing more than that looking is qualitatively different from listening or reading and that one form of information does not perfectly translate into another. Ballet's has a wonderfully precise understanding of this formal logic yet her work cannot be reduced to form alone. Her minimalism is tempered by knowledge of the viewer's contribution to the production of meaning.

Much of her recent work has deliberately required the audience to become involved in its final appearance and two projects in particular seem to have influenced the work for

Berwick. 'Trait pour trait' (Line by line), a public commission for Kerguéhennec in Brittany, was made for a forest clearing. Ballet built a circular steel "cage" 11.5 m in diameter and 5 m high, made from closely set steel bars and open on top. The cage could be entered through a small door which sprung shut immediately. From outside the cage the area within became denied and therefore desirable. Once inside the feeling of confinement within a natural environment was confusing. Although escape was easy, shades of ancient folk myths about being trapped in a forest entered the mind. Inside too, the trees seemed further away, the vegetation, though running continuously through the sculpture changed its nature. The enclosure acted as a contemplation about an anonymous site now reclaimed for our attention.

A more recent work was made in Tramway, Glasgow. A series of formally rigorous sculptures were placed on a salt covered floor. As the exhibition progressed, the tracks of the visitors were left in the salt, marking out the passage of the social. The sculptures themselves enclosed small territories where the salt was left untouched-pure but lifeless in contrast to the public area with "all its possibilities".

From all these works comes a clear commitment to examine the problematics of sculpture. Ballet's work exists as a set of propositions about site, space and audience which only come together when we stand before or within the work. Ultimately all a catalogue essay can really say it – go and look for yourself.