

'Can't sing: dry crumbs in my throat'

Exhibition text by Marco Cali

Tens of thousands of years ago, humans descended into caves to paint and scratch images onto the rock wall. Over the millennia that followed, they perfected the techniques and increased the complexity of what was being created. These environments were not a picture gallery as such. Lighting would be scarce, fugitive and hand held, animating the scenes. We can imagine words being spoken, perhaps by the artists themselves or some interpretative other. The whole space is somewhere where the group can experience, what, a kind of ritual, some mutual bonding, a moment of recognition, self awareness and understanding.

The first time I stepped into Héloïse Delègue's work, I had something of this experience. At once surreal, full of humour and vulnerable. It felt like the journal of this artist was there, edited and shabby at the same time. I was pulled into individual works. Their details. The odd word. The different textures and media. A kind of neo-narrative. Not so much biographical but more like an echo chamber of a conversation. The techniques are giddy. Free flowing paintings, embroidery, ceramics, sound and digital video combine with the geometry of the space. Am I being led through or am I wandering freely? It feels like bouncing back and forth from one thought, to an overheard phrase, a cartoon instant, an observation, an existential encounter. To be in her work is to put your ear to her mouth and hear something that is neither a desperate scream nor a childlike giggle.

The references are many. There are narratives that dance around a given thought. It's a way to understand life's experiences through a cathartic process. We could state the obvious. This is work by a young artist, French but living her most formative years in another culture with parallel traditions. An artist working at this moment in time, when technology and tradition erase and rewrite one another. A time when it seems archaic to mention postmodern as something meaningful. What we find are micro themes with universal appeal. Crystal clear viewpoints that are not so much multiplied, as shattered and only a few shards reassigned some sense of place and order.

The surfaces are covered with organic shapes that morph into language, memes, emoji elements and suggestive movie poster fragments. Are we leafing through the pages of a school biology book, amoebae moving in their under-the-microscope world, or perhaps we're seeing the distortions as if underwater or in a dream. Life as some kind of fluid, something between symbolic meanings and carnal existence. The images are studded with oddball juxtapositions, eyes, lips yes, legs, but also nipples or are they some other skin growths, verrucas or pimples. From the sensuous to the ridiculing, carnal to a death that isn't heroic or somehow transcendent, but small time, embarrassing, ongoing. This is lived experience as a toad in a puddle being poked about by a curious, mischievous mind. The overall effect is one of a bomb going off within the gallery. One of those cartoon explosions that leave bits of coyote or cat splattered all over the place, guts quiver, eyes blink, lips mouth in comic disbelief. What I particularly like is how the whole is orchestrated. It is a guided chaos, very

carefully thought through and fully felt in every detail. I imagine that getting to this stage took the artist from a messy uncertain beginning to a point with some kind of satisfaction. A comma in an ongoing journey as opposed to a grand finale “that’s all folks” moment.

The cave painters were not just creating work for some long forgotten art world. This was an elemental need, something that defines humans, as much as speech and developing complex social relations. Both making and being absorbed by these artworks is part of who we are at this time, in this place. In this sense Eloise Delege is both creator and shaman in this tradition of our times. Through her work, she is the fool at our court who pokes holes through our social fabric.

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