

Unearth that which is Hidden

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The oldest known recording of song is a series of notations inscribed on a clay tablet 3,400 years ago, found in Syria. Originally, it was played on a lyre. Imagining the world as it was so long ago is a strain and understanding reality under the pressure of time is always incomplete, pushing history, perhaps, into fantasy. The timeless music on this tablet occurs in a sound piece titled Early Song, which runs through the space upon entering the exhibition. It has been made by the artist from this ancient inscription, twisting the lengths and pitches of the notes to generate a groaning, a sound that is not attributable to any traditional instrument and seeming other-worldly. This work could be as much from the future as from the past.

The slipperiness of time is echoed in the loss of site, a notion which threads through the entire exhibition. There is no one protagonist in the figures, no one narrative, nor one place that could be named. As substitutions of site, themes of birth, death, and the in-between states create a grounding which removes us from the minutiae of personal life and catapults us into potentially universal questions.

In-between states are fundamental in our own questioning of reality, the ways in which we make choices, perhaps relinquish or wield power and, simply, experience life. We walk along 21st Century Sleepwalk as a passage through the

space, a wall of detours and questions – “are you awake? are you still dreaming?”, “do you notice the moon?”, “how is the counselling going?”.

These diversions are not just key to our own experience of the work, but also for how the artist produces it. An interim realm as a site of making.

A lack of determinism, not knowing where one is going, but instead feeling out where one is, offered by Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers in their book *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* as philosophical locus, is reflected not only in Talbot’s approach to making, but is also referenced explicitly in the exhibition’s title, *Sounders of the Depths*. In being a sounder of the depths we can find our own agency:

Sounders of the depths should not invent words that are to be understood as beyond division, as if they were authorised by a transcendence in the presence of which everyone must kneel: that is the role of the prophet, or his substitute today, the theorist. The words to be created ought rather to serve as antidotes to what transforms divergences into oppositions, what makes us dream of a homogeneous unanimity, of a judgement that will at last confer on history the power to recognise those who had seen correctly.

– Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*.

In the work of the same title, *Sounders of the Depths*, a series of drawings refuses to be fixed – to be fixed to the wall or to provide fixed representations; these pieces hover between being a dream diary and a series of automatic drawings. It is important to state that an occupation of uncertainty is far from a quest for nonchalance. Instead it is an active process by which to see. The hope is that when one sees something, as opposed to blindly accepting it, other possibilities can begin to emerge.

The opening up of potential, of becoming, of making beyond presumed forms, is a well-trodden ground in feminist writing. Both Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray are cornerstones for the artist in thinking about form in her own work, or rather about process, as the form of the drawings is often initially unknown and the result of open experimentation. Cixous argued to put the unthinkable into words, while Talbot puts that which is held in the subconscious firmly into relief, and brings it to the forefront. There is an unflinching commitment throughout this exhibition, from the artist herself, to place in full view the questions and thoughts that consume her, as well as an urging for us to find the ability to isolate our own.

She falls back into a depth of thought: that goes right to the bottom of things, beyond appearances, would therefore be difficult to penetrate because it is more internal, more secret, but also more durable because it is not subject to the fluctuations of the sensations, of the perceptible world. From time to time it is worthwhile to flatten out this "inside" (of the spirit), bring it to the surface. – Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*

On entering the exhibition we are confronted with an image central to our existence but often hidden, *Your Birth* – the epic historical moment

you can't remember. Birth here is timeless and placeless, like visualising an ancient song; the impossibility of remembering our first stage into the world renders the sculptures almost-alien. The woman giving birth on top of a placenta painting on silk, the baby, the placenta and the two lyres – also wombs – create a network with one another. This constellation of painting and objects is placed on a pink almost-clinical platform and again this is imbued with a sense of the extraterrestrial. The tentacular arms and tiny feet of the figures seem nonhuman, but are also perfectly in line with a drawing style developed by the artist over the last decade. As with all Talbot's work across many mediums – drawing, sculpture, painting, installation – everything begins as a drawing. Drawing is the most immediate mark making, mode of representation, act of recording (early songs amongst everything else) and perhaps the easiest way to access making through sensing, without preconceived expectations of what will be made. In keeping with a draftsman's mode of creating, the sculptures stand strong as drawings-in-3D.

The network created with the sculptures on the pink oval platform are crucial to the loss of specific time and place throughout the show. They create a grounding, one to the universe perhaps, through the cords, the placenta, the literal raising up and presenting the act of birth. Or a grounding of the self with everything else – a connected form of being.

The other type of connectedness here is ironically winked at by way of the selfie stick in the hands of one of the figures. Talbot's consideration of how consciousness operates in a digitally connected world is a branch continued from her exhibition *Open Thoughts* at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein in 2017. In *Open Thoughts* painted silk hangings provided a maze through which to walk, with figures of various scales in dream

states or writing on phones and laptops, thus linking the act of imagination with that of communication. What we might see as illusion is also a concrete part of the reality we construct with our digital selves.

This exhibition, *Sounders of the Depths*, moves beyond the personal story and beyond one experience of being a woman. Yet due to the use of such strong female imagery, this first installation, or scene, is perhaps most distinctly an extension of some recent work by the artist.

Talbot's *You Do Not Belong To You (Universal Story)* (2016) took the form of a tent, alluding to the historic practice of women with synced menstrual cycles collectivising together in a separate space. The painted vaginal openings on the tent were inspired by the *Sheela Na Gig*, a carving typical of medieval churches, which depict a woman holding her vagina open, to ward off evil. *Your Birth* – the epic historical moment you can't remember therefore feels connected to, but developed in a different way from this. It is not the figure of the life-giver that is the anchor in the reading of the work – here women do not give birth, as emphasised in the use of "Your" in the title, but the babies are birthing themselves. The sense of self-determination at the point of inception, which is offered in this scene, evokes the will and power proposed by Cixous in *To Be Born*: that a will to exist is inherent in all of us, a precursor to consciousness, and that understanding this power is vital to one's self-actualisation. The inherent politics of a praxis or way of being that demands that we do not accept the present reality as the only option, that we do not sleepwalk, and instead reflect enough so that we might be able to imagine alternatives, could seem stifled in an exhibition where death is so present. However, Talbot's insistence of the interrelatedness of one's birth and death – as being impossible for us to remember or project – places an

exploratory magnifying glass on the stages connecting the two. If we cannot conceive of our death, nor remember our birth, then mustn't we find our agency in life? "Do you keep thinking there must be another way."

In *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* pragmatism is offered as way of understanding Marx: doing, seeing what happens, as means to demystify Capitalism. In fact, sounding out contemporary situations could be described as a cognitive mapping of the present, in order to envisage another way – both politically and socially – rather than simply sounding out one's own individual state of being or looking inward at oneself. In the book, the writers veer into presenting witchcraft as that alternative mode of operation aimed at understanding things differently. Yet putting this proposition to one side is pivotal to understanding Talbot's show. Aesthetically, at first sight, the works might be viewed as occult. A skeleton hangs by its feet from the top of an opening in *How Is (Your Own) Death So Inconceivable?*. Emerging from the skeleton is the outline of a figure, conceived by the artist as a living person transfixed by staring death in the face. The absence of references to any specific forms of paganism, witchcraft or occult practices is deliberate. Again, the fact that this is not attached to one specific place or history hopefully opens up a space for each of us to sense our present state not only as we walk through the show, but also in the contexts beyond the gallery that we exist in now.

21st Century Sleepwalk depicts the meantime, and physically acts as a passage between the installations showing both the start and end of life. It represents perhaps the most important phase of life. This stage is the only one that might in fact present moments to us that we can take into our own hands. Looking at these painted silk hangings prompts us to question the cities we

move about in and our experience of contemporary capitalism. Far from taking us into the realm of fantasy, Talbot involves us in truly looking, sounding, seeing the reality of the psychogeographies in which we live. This subtle and meandering contemplation on what consciousness is, or what it offers to the viewer, brings us back to moments in Talbot's exhibition at NAK. In that earlier show, the backs of the silk hangings were painted as bricks; suddenly the open space of thought through which we passed on entering the exhibition became a series of very real walls around which the body had to steer itself when tracing its steps backwards in order to leave the show. In *Open Thoughts* the line written by the artist – “whose voice is this speaking in silence? Not a god or a government, it's you” – brings power into our states of being, into our lived interactions. Can we act out of despair?

This shift from psychological space to that of exterior architecture also reflects a change in the frequently domestic spaces explored in the artist's earlier work, which was based more on a personal narrative. The first time I ever saw Emma Talbot's works 'in person' was at her exhibition *Pictures From My Heart*, held at Transition Gallery almost a decade ago in London. This moving exhibition of drawings (or drawings with paint, which is how I often think of Talbot's work), set up in rows akin to the reading of a comic or storyboard, but on a wall, were psychological 'stories' (as the artist calls them), following her bereavement and early widowhood. The honesty in this work, and the visibility of a personal narrative set the work apart from traditional Modernist expectations of art – for to aim for something higher, or even moral. Moreover the slightness of the work – small drawings for such poignant contemplations – refused an undoubtedly patriarchal and formal mode of making.

This exhibition sees the artist continue to move

away from an explicitly personal narrative, instead perhaps playing with the masculine universal philosophical questions posed in much Modernist art. However, what is key in Talbot's weaving of storytelling and psychological space, is that things are questioned rather than absolutes told. There is formally and materially a refusal for these questions to be posed in an authoritative way – the painting is off the stretcher, the sculpture is made in fabric. In particular the lightness of the silk that much of the work is painted on carefully avoids performative dominance, whilst also responding to the call to sense our unconscious. The fact that in so many ways the paintings, the sculptures, the installations are also drawings at the same time declaration of love for a quieter process of making, for making by hand.

A walk through the space is a walk through everyone's life span: birth, life, death. There is a real beauty to the way the exhibition is set out: a process of navigation for the viewer – to follow a path and question our own capacity: “in what way have you been co-opted? are you the sleeping partner?”, “don't you keep asking what it would be like if power was put to different uses?”

As for the hydra shape: instead of its many heads re-growing (seen by the artist as a metaphor for the model of late capitalism), the hydra lies coiled as a symbol of power put to a different use. Just as with Talbot's sculptures at NAK, snakes with heads of women supported by microphone stands, the snake is a symbol containing so much of the power we are being reminded to believe that we can channel. In *Snakes Rising*, *Sirens* sculptures on microphone stands evoked a choir chanting a Cixousian call to find one's voice, as well as her head of Medusa – read as the symbol of woman birthing herself.

The most monumental of the works is the death piece, titled *How Is (Your Own) Death So Inconceivable?*, a forceful and perhaps oxymoronic title

for a work that, in fact, demonstrates an epic picture of death. A dormant volcanic mountain that could erupt any time stands tall, with a head of a woman as its zenith, some kind of crone, some kind of wisdom, again without specific reference. One outer facet of the mountain acts as the façade of the earth, with some of its layers revealed, another psychological story perhaps of the climb that is entailed to sort through life with our eyes open. When one walks around to see the inner compartment of the carved out volcano we see beyond the façade a fossilised figure pre-empting death as a fixed inevitability. Birth and death have their own inevitability, so perhaps it's no coincidence that the objects that become almost artefacts (the cups of blood, the lyres) in Your Birth - the epic historical moment you can't remember, don't seem too dissimilar in tone to that of the human fossil placed at the centre of How Is (Your Own) Death So Inconceivable?. Unearth that which is hidden. Again time folds in on itself.

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All unannotated quotes from 21st Century Sleepwalk, 2018, by Emma Talbot.