



Penelope STEWART: *Apian Screen*

Natalie OLANICK

When we first experience Penelope Stewart's sensory installation, *Apian Screen*, a room in the museum covered from floor to ceiling with beeswax tiles, there is a delight in the honey colours and musky odours of wax, which lead our thoughts and feelings to natural wonders. As we look closer, and stay longer in her wax environment, we see a logic being imposed onto this delectable surface, not a harsh oppositional difference but rather an intellectualization that is entwined within the wax.

There is a brazen exploration of methods, materials and language represented in *Apian Screen*. Stewart develops a process of creation, which combines the practical and repetitive, mundane work of domestic maintenance with her creative inquiry. Her choice of a simple wax tile (4" x 4") becomes a significant feature of the work. She has cast thousands of them and adhered them to the walls, stacking one beside the other both horizontally and vertically. They transform the site and become the space that they occupy.

The work of Eva Hesse, her insights and reasoning of why and how she worked with repetition, is a solid foundation for reading *Apian Screen*. Lucy Lippard quotes Hesse: "If something is absurd it's much more greatly exaggerated if it's repeated. Repetition does enlarge or increase or exaggerate an idea or purpose. I guess repetition feels obsessive."¹

Apian Screen is an obsessive work. We can see the delicate care that is taken to create each component of the screen and Stewart's inventive play and attention to detail, pattern, tessellation and mirroring becomes a human honey comb of sorts. Randomness only exists in the colouration of the wax modules. Further, Stewart's incorporation of common methods of fabrication for dwellings and decoration segue into the relief imagery that appears like a wax map or topography. The surface reveals a series of linear forms that connect together to create larger geometric shapes. Her topography begins with a cluster of small buildings and radiating roadways, connecting one to the other. This

wax drawing too, has a heroic quality, like religious symbols or logos of corporations, yet the nature of the beeswax anchors the imagery into a realm of unlikely or to cite Hesse, "absurd possibilities."

Modernist architects and their utopian propositions of a social, planned model for cities have inspired Stewart. Specifically, Stewart has examined the work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, the architects/landscape architects who won the competition in 1908 to create the first planned city, Canberra, which would become the new capital of Australia. Their plan, modeled on the *garden city* or *prairie school*, was a collection of intertwining geometric motifs such as circles, triangles and hexagons culled from a relationship between nature and culture and the social model of insects. The maze of roadways provided the city structure with metaphoric site lines from one significant building to another. Stewart's wax cartography mimics these ideas of a model city.

The Griffins, being modernists, espoused a utopian metaphysical ideology and the virtues of beauty, justice and triumph. Stewart's work, referencing modernism's values, is a postmodern conceptual enterprise and her methods, materials and language suggest the oscillating nature of a utopian proposition. *Apian Screen* is a haptic architecture. Stewart's methodology and materials create a sensory intensification, a supernatural space. The visual allure, the aroma and the desire to touch are

compelling but eventually it is the scent that undermines the beauty and the experience, first through seduction and then through suffocation. Like moths to a flame, we enter the space again and again reliving the experience. The room toys with us, as we feel drawn to it by its colour, its smooth skin-like surface, its topography, its volume and its intriguing pattern. Touching the relief, following the pattern, where does it connect? Where does it repeat? It is this visceral language that asks the question... whose Utopia? "Paradise for one could be hell for another."²

The combination of form and materials demonstrates a personal interpretation of protection and carries with it a feeling of comfort, a secure place for rumination with no fixed goal.

In *Apian Screen*, we see a practical definition for the living conditions of our general population become a

personal passion. The detailed labour that is required to create the work is Stewart's language, which aptly describes exploration and consolation. We explore our own surprise evoked from Stewart's particular fusion of nature and culture. ←

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NOTES

1. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York University Press (1976), p. 209.
2. Murray White, "A bee's-eye view of city-building," *Toronto Star*, November 12, 2009.



Penelope STEWART, *Apian Screen*, 2012. Installation. Photo: courtesy artist and Musée d'art Joliette.

