

Excerpts from a Conversation

between Anne O'Callaghan and Penelope Stewart

Your practice is interdisciplinary, and you work fluidly between installation, sculpture, photography, drawing, print media and areas in between. I also note that your material choices range from the more traditional to the ephemeral or mutable. What is the connection between your approach, methods and materials?

My approach is quite simple I am interested in *space, time and memory*, and the simultaneity of hope and despair. This territory is best expressed for me through a variety of modalities and materials which fluctuate depending on the project. Their relationship is embedded in my practice and it becomes a language unto itself. So when I imagine a project I am considering first the site and the ideas, and then the medium and the materials. Nothing is arbitrary and there is a conversation happening between all the components.

Over the past decade the installations and architectural interventions have been the largest part of your practice. I am curious about how you understand the role of architecture and the relationship of the materials?

The existing architectures become an integral part of the work as it establishes place and time. I love the nature of the architectural intervention as a mode in which to operate. It allows me to create spaces that can only exist as imaginary and ephemeral. My interventions disturb our expectations of the building or the room and allow us to think differently about what is real, what is imagined and what else might be contained within the memory of the specific space.

Currently, these architectural interventions are constructed using beeswax. I create high relief beeswax tiles and sculptures as the building components that line the spaces. As a material, beeswax has properties that are very attractive to me and adds a sensory dimension to the installation beginning with the aromatic smell and the touch, the tactility and the warm colours but it is also the metaphors intrinsic to beeswax that move me to use it as a sculpting medium. The wax is stable and can be re-melted and transformed over and over. For me the material is both mutable and alive.

These interventions are large and must involve an enormous amount of time and labour and then they're gone. Does this ever bother you to put so much work into something that is so transient?

No, in fact it is what delights me about working in this way. The architecture, the excessive labour and material all create an immersive space in the studio and at the site. These elements together with the realization that the installations are temporary create the conversation. The ephemerality is intrinsic to each project. Time is encoded in all parts.

Sometimes it feels absurd to put so much time into a project that will exist for such a short period, but in fact I have realized over time that it is this short life span, this transience and potential transformation that gives me energy and I think the work agency. It speaks too, to the temporality of all things, to a life, death cycle; to loss but also to hope. Nothing stays the same. It is always in a state of transformation and that for me is hopeful. It also suggests a mindfulness to be present in the process and a delight in the result knowing that it will be something else in the future.

Sometimes I think that I am really just revealing some latent ghost hidden in the walls and through my imagination something emerges. There is a nice reciprocity between the architecture and the spectator, but there is also a little anxiety created by the ephemerality of the work in the site. I like this tension.

I love what is generated by my immersion into these sites as it will often have spin offs as photographic projects and/or works on paper. These quieter, more traditional formats are just as exciting for me as the installations. They help me to negotiate the edges of what I am considering.

Your work has always had an architectural focus but in the last eight years there seems to be a more intense relationship with notions of sensory architectures. Can you tell me how this journey began?

I have always been interested in the phenomenology of architecture. Space for me is never benign; it is full of energy -- sometimes latent and sometimes right in front of you. I love architects such as Juhani Pallasmaa or Peter Zumthor who suggest through their created spaces the relationship with the senses. I think the senses are great recorders of space and time... a body memory. That relationship has been strong throughout my practice and one of the central themes even in my early workⁱ. I am always looking for the connection between the body and site. This inquiry also has utopian overtones which led me to re-think and consider more closely the work of Le Corbusier, Gaudi, Olmsted, and Burley Griffin.

Although I had touched on immersive architectures in the past, it was *Parois* (2007) my first beeswax room created in France during a residency at the Musée Barthète,ⁱⁱ that fully expressed my desire to create haptic architectures using beeswax. I wanted a sensory architecture, an environment that made you want to touch, to smell, to feel it in the body, while absorbing the visual.

The previous year I had explored mould making and using beeswax in the moulds. The wax as a material was sensuous and malleable with an aromatic smell that was intoxicating and conjured up all sorts of associations. It seemed a perfect material to line existing spaces, with the wax transforming them into dynamic phenomenological sites.

Parois and subsequent wax rooms you have created are also mathematically complicated. Can you explain?

I have always been aware of the mathematics - geometry- proportion-of architecture. However, while in France exploring the museum's archive of tiles, I discovered and was fascinated by the notion that with one tile design tessellated (turned) and repeated one could create several different patterns; closed motifs or those that snaked across a room. With this in mind I began a very complicated beeswax installation entitled *Apian Screens* (2010). The primary wax module comprised 90 high relief tiles that when repeated and tessellated functioned as a large unit of 360 tiles that created a closed motif of a city scape, a topographical map with interlocking roadways and buildings. This intricate landscape, and immersive architecture was realized at the Albright -Knox Art Gallery, New York and is my largest intervention to date. It comprised over 15,000 tiles that covered the walls (30'w x22' h, 35'w x 22'h, 30'w x 22' h) in the gallery's sculpture court rotunda area. The space has an imposing marble pediment and it was important to suggest that the tiles belonged there and were part of the original architecture.

Apian Screen at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery was a perfect architectural intervention. It had a strange contradiction because it was so lush on such a grand scale. It was a grid and so referenced modernism...and it was fully unified with the Neo-classical marble pediments so you thought it was in fact part of the building. The giveaway that it was an

intervention was the smell of the wax as you entered the gallery courtyard.

Yes, I was very happy with the way it was fully integrated. It was by far the most complex intervention to install as the turning of the tiles to create the city plan was mind bending. You are correct that it was the smell that announced itself even before you saw it. It was a very satisfying installation because it hit all the points I was interested in.

I have seen other artists use beeswax but your use seems to come from a slightly different set of ideas, perhaps a more sophisticated approach?

My concerns are with architecture and metaphor. For me the beeswax is twofold. It is both a malleable material and a material full of metaphors. After creating the work *Parois*, in France I began thinking more about the hive...after all in essence, that is what I had created. I revisited Le Corbusier's drawings of the "primitive hut" and also visited the Unité d'Habitation, Marseilles (1952), his building modelled after the social structure of the beehive. On the same trip I visited Barcelona and saw the fabulous whimsical and organic work of Gaudi. These experiences led me to discover that both architects had a relationship with apiaries and had spent time observing bees. The social structure of the beehive became important to how both architects began to imagine space.

Is this the source of the La Ruche projects which feature the straw beehive?

Yes, I mentioned I had been looking at Le Corbusier and his "primitive hut". As well I was researching apiaries and bee husbandry. It was in this research that I discovered a manmade beehive called a "bee skep" usually constructed from straw or willow. They date back at least 4000 years and are still used in many countries instead of the rational box beehive that we are accustomed to seeing. I loved the bell shape and its very clear reference to Le Corbusier's ideas appealed to me. I found a wonderful artist named Lisa Head who was keeping alive the traditional basket techniques and was weaving beautiful rye straw bee skeps. I purchased one and it has been my inspiration for the past three or four years. At the point at which I received the skep, I was invited to Canberra Glassworks (Australia) for a two month residency. There I worked with master glass artist Ruth Allan. She facilitated my project which was to create a glass bee skep. It was an amazing adventure to work in the artist factory and have not only the talents of Ruth to guide me, but to work in the environment with such a tremendous community of glass artists.

Previously, you spoke of projects generating other works. Did this experience working in glass inspire you in other directions?

Yes, while I was working on the glass sculpture I had a burning desire to draw an architectural scale ink and brush rendering of the bee skep. So when I got back to Toronto I began *La Grand Ruche* which is approximately 10'x10' and uses multiple pieces of mitsumatta tissue tiled together. This drawing has had several spinoffs and continues to inspire me. I am currently working on a suite of smaller related screenprints and etchings. They just keep coming.

I have a couple of questions about the relationship between Apian Screen and your most recent intervention at Ganna Walska Lotusland, Santa Barbara California. First can you tell me more about Lotusland and how you became

involved? And then could you discuss the shift between the architectonic aspects of Apian Screen and the movement towards a more baroque rendering in this latest project Daphne at Lotusland.

I had never heard of Lotusland until I was contacted by Nancy Gifford, Independent curator and artist. She was very persuasive and along with Gwen Stauffer, the Executive Director of this botanical garden they invited me to be an Artist in Residence to create an installation for their bi-annual exhibition. This 2013 exhibition was entitled *Swarm: a Collaboration with Bees*.

My first real introduction was a site visit in October, 2012 with the residency to begin in January, 2013. During the site visit I took hundreds of photographs and listened to stories about Ganna Walska, the eccentric creator of the garden. Walking the thirty-seven acres I was struck by the way in which Walska had approached her plantings. There was an abundance of everything and the excess and repetition created an infinite accumulation and a site for transformative and transgressive organic patterns. *So excess, repetition, accumulation and transformation* became my key words as I pondered how I would respond. The environment in so many ways is a *baroque dream space*.

In previous work I was responding directly to the architecture, to the building, the place and to a latent interior imagination. My response was to work with the geometry of that site with an ordered pattern and controlled tessellation that reflected the utopian urban plan. It was always informed by the architecture and the place.

At Lotusland I would be responding to a theatrical landscape and transferring that to an interior site. How would this resonate? Ganna Walska had planted rows of palms and euphorbias and carpets of succulents and incorporated strange objects and artifacts into her vision of the garden and I wanted to repeat this spirit on the walls. Prior to my visit I had also been thinking about Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*, the marble sculpture in Rome. In the myth, Daphne is transformed into a tree. This story lingered in my imagination and very quickly Walska's garden and the myth of Daphne became conflated and interlaced. My *Daphne*, the wax room at Lotusland would become a threshold space, a site of transformation, a space of sensory intensification and in some respects an architectural poem.

You have also created a suite of black and white photographs of the garden and they have quite a ghostly appearance but also are reminiscent of white marble statuary. Is this too a reference to the myth?

Yes, very definitely the garden became a stand in for Daphne. There was just so much to absorb at Lotusland. Living in this garden was an immersive experience unto itself and I wanted to document it beyond the installation. I took hundreds of photos of the garden on my daily walks and when I got home and sorted the photographic collection, patterns began to emerge. I imagined these photographs as faint ghostly images and so printed the series as negatives.

These are the photographs included in the catalogue?

Yes... they seemed to describe the experience of the residency so well. Ghostly apparitions of time – out of time and place. They too remind me of a nostalgic garden, an Eden of the imagination, one where everything is in balance: Bees pollinating, flora and fauna thriving, a harmony of the life force...

You mention bees and pollination...Do you position your work in relationship to the environment? Bees? Beehives? Bee collapse? Are these concerns intrinsic to your installations?

Initially, I was interested solely in the architectural metaphors, the phenomenology and the haptic qualities of the wax. However, the current political state of bee deaths and colony collapse has layered a further anxiety over my work. The metaphors have broadened and usually the first question asked by visitors to these immersive spaces is about the bees.

I am very concerned about the bees. My large works have taken on an eco-morphology that contemplates the hive, hive culture and loss. My labour and manufacturing of the tiles and sculptures and the ephemerality of the works mimics not only the bees' repetitive collective activity and industrious building, but is also analogous to their demise. The ephemerality of my interventions and in this case also the ghostly garden scapes foreshadow the possible disappearance of the bee and ask us to consider what it would mean if the world existed without these amazing pollinators. How would we survive? Would we survive? In so many ways these projects have become acts of resistance stirring a conversation centered on our relationship with bees and the natural world.

ⁱ The House Project 1994 and Performance in the Present 1996

ⁱⁱ Musée Barthète, www.barthete.com