

Book Review: Kate Whiteford Land Drawings/ Installations/ Excavations

Kate Whiteford *Land Drawings/ Installations/ Excavations* black dog publishing A new publication examining the work of celebrated artist Kate Whiteford OBE, RSA presents a fascinating portrait of the artist's engagement with landscape, architecture and archaeology. Launched to coincide with the exhibition *New Film Work from the Hebrides* at the Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh in January 2009, *Kate Whiteford Land Drawings/ Installations/ Excavations* presents a compelling and insightful survey of the artist's work over the last twenty years. Over two hundred photographs and illustrations document Whiteford's diverse range of practice including paintings, drawings, tapestry, theatre design, installations and monumental landworks. Complimentary to this visual narrative, essays by Richard Cork, Richard Nightingale, Colin Renfrew, John Phibbs, Yves Abrioux and Kate Whiteford provide a fascinating commentary that inspires further exploration of the original work. Informed by the disciplines of art criticism, art practice, architecture and archaeology, the selected texts investigate what architect Richard Nightingale describes as the "cerebral and visceral" aspects of Whiteford's extraordinary work.

Each of these varied perspectives reveals the symbiotic relationship between technique, ideas and materials inherent in her practice and presents an evolutionary portrait of the artist through examination of her site specific works. The artist's process and engagement with history; a layering of time, materials and perspectives, is revealed with text and image informing each other and enabling an open dialogue with the reader. The approach like that of the artist is satisfyingly multilayered, building a picture of cross currents at work in architectural installations and land drawings such as *Sitelines:*

Venice commissioned for the 44th Venice Biennale (1990), *Priory Maze*, Coventry (2000), *Shadow of a Necklace* Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute (2001) and *Excavation (Circle and Arch)* Jesus College, Cambridge (2005).

Richard Cork's essay *Subversive Incisions* is a superb exploration of the artist's influences, creative process and development beginning with Whiteford's seminal land based work *Sculpture for Carlton Hill, Edinburgh* (1987). Cork describes beautifully the ancient resonance and "playful conceit" at the heart of Whiteford's practice revealing layers of dynamic interpretation between landscape, memory and our built environment. Whiteford's preoccupation with uncovering hidden human marks upon the landscape and her construction of "fictional archaeology" present a dynamic of transformation and rediscovery of the specific site. Reference to the built environment in Whiteford's work presents the viewer with the potential for multiple interpretations. The neoclassical monuments of Carlton Hill are a good example, subverted by the appearance of land drawings cut into the turf, seemingly unearthed from prehistory.

The idea of "remote sensing" explored in Colin Renfrew's discussion of Whiteford's work at the British School in Rome (1993-1994) is an example of the way in which the process of excavation informs the act of seeing both for artist and audience. Her study of wartime aerial reconnaissance photographs in Italy and subsequent use of this heightened perspective in works such as *A'Mhointeach: The Moor, Isle of Lewis* (2006) illuminate marks made by man over centuries beneath the surface landscape. This process of unearthing is as much about the present as it is about the past, revealing levels of recognition and meaning in a dialogue between contemporary life, art and ancient ritual.

Anyone interested in art, architecture, history or design will find much to contemplate in a work such as Whiteford's *Sitelines, Harewood (After Chippendale)* 2000. The publication provides a tantalising range of viewpoints utilising text and image as touchstones to explore Whiteford's on site investigation of the exterior serpentine line of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown's landscape design, interior furniture design by Chippendale and prehistoric land drawing. The ways in which marks of different ages interact physically and symbolically within the "Sitelines" constructed by the artist on the Harewood Estate, Yorkshire are beautifully compelling. The relationships between interior installation and exterior land drawing create an expansive series of framed references or imaginative thresholds which enable the viewer to actively contemplate the architecture of civilisation and the meaning of design. Martin Kemp described one of the central concerns of Whiteford's work as "will to form and will to meaning" an element "shared at the most fundamental level by different human societies" universally across all ages. The function of art or culture represented by our built environment is in Whiteford's hands an agent of transformation and recognition, qualities one could argue often lacking elsewhere in the world of contemporary art.

This richly illustrated publication encourages connections to be made independently between text and image, allowing the artist's vision to shine through each accumulative discussion of her work, influences and development. The international scope of Whiteford's practice, her cross disciplinary approach and ability to make the nature of art, design and architecture visible are inspirational. This first comprehensive survey of the art of Kate Whiteford provides a welcome stimulus for further discovery and exploration of her work.

Georgina Coburn

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