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Review: Nicola Ellis & Aura Satz, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester

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Castlefield Gallery's annual *Head to Head* exhibition pairs two artists at different stages of their careers; this year Manchester based Nicola Ellis and Barcelona born, London based Aura Satz. The question of what constitutes an 'emerging' or 'mid-career' artist – overused, nondescript terms that artists often feel uncomfortable using in self-reference – is not the main focus of why the pairings in this series of exhibitions have been made. Rather it is the use of materials; crucially the work itself, that garners interest in why two artists with no particular shared background should be brought together. Subsequently, the gallery's current programme theme of 'Altered Realities' sets the tone for the artists' explorations of materials.

The balance between works featured by each artist seems to be very considered: in each section of the space there appears to be an equal or opposite by both artists. Both artists have included drawings in the exhibition, which are works in their own right and also developmental studies for their respective sculptural and film works. The recommended viewing order begins with a selection of these drawings on paper in the upper gallery; a series of mark making experimentations in colourful pigment, enamel, acrylic and gilding flakes by Ellis and black ink diagrammatic drawings by Satz. There is also a lightbox featuring a filmstrip from Satz's 16mm film projection which is showing in the lower gallery. The drawings, viewed as preliminary sketches in a traditional sense, also become the introduction to the exhibition.

Echoing the work in the upper gallery, Ellis and Satz both present larger scale drawings and lightboxed filmstrips in the lower gallery. Ellis' drawings are framed downstairs, which might be a curatorial decision to 'mirror' Satz's lightbox aesthetics, but the reflective glass seems to obscure something from veined rock-like watercolour shapes. The surface qualities of materials Ellis explores can be better viewed in the upper gallery: Ambiguous forms bleed into each other and the paper, forming trickles and blobs, and illustrate more about the materials themselves than anything obviously representational. However, the amorphous blobs on paper do have a distinct resonance with Ellis' site-specific sculpture made especially for the two-storey gallery space.

Porites is a paper mache and polyurethane foam clad steel 'L' structure sitting conservatively in the middle of the space. It's neutral off-white finish blends in with the white walls of the gallery and, despite its huge scale, is paradoxically the understated piece on show. Perhaps because it has been made for this exact space, or because of its innocuous material qualities, the form seems *at home* rather than on show. Named after a type of stony coral it bares resemblance to, *Porites* appears to have organically grown across the gallery floor and up towards the two storey high ceiling, responding to the confines of its natural habitat.

Satz's parallel 'feature' piece in the show is a 21 minute 16mm film projection with audio entitled *In and Out of Synch*. First, shown as a performance at Tate Modern's Tanks last year, mesmerizing waveforms of sound depicted as light flash up on the gallery wall whilst the audio track plays two voices in conversation. As the light punctuates the darkened projection space, so does the audio, and the viewer can visualise what is being vocalised. There is a slight time delay between audio and visual and the varying synchronicity illuminates the flawed characteristics of the outmoded, almost extinct, film projection technology.

The filmstrips in the lower gallery from *Vocal Flame* on 35mm are exploring a similar process of visualising audio on archaic materials, but this time in flame waveform generated by a Ruben's tube - an even more primitive sound visualisation device. Satz's drawings in the upper gallery also correspond visually with manometric flames drawn from a rotating mirror. The ink strokes on paper resemble linocuts; the white flames the relief or absence of ink. Her other set of drawings on display, *Auricles 1-3*, depict a cross between pairs of simplified inner ear diagrams and ornate ear trumpets.

Satz's hybridisation of old-fashioned/human materials and devices result in deceptively simple yet scientifically complex studies of the fundamental organs of audio-visual experience. In parallel, Ellis's experimentation with traditional materials are similarly simple in appearance and also inspired by the infinitely complex natural world. Whereas Satz draws upon the physics of experience, Ellis is more the alchemist. Theirs are not two practices that could be described as overtly similar, but put together like this the subtleties of their work resonate and are therefore illuminated. The gallery invites us to view the work not at different levels, but as corresponding *Altered Realities*; drawn from realities of experience and materials which diverge as two quite different experimental practices.

Head to Head: Nicola Ellis & Aura Satz is on display at Castlefield Gallery, Manchester until 20 October 2013.

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