

BAKER HOWARD

CONTEMPORARY

The Landscapes of Form – the Angelic to the Grotesque.

This exhibition is curated by Richard Baker-Howard and Alice Gee.

The Landscapes of Form – the Angelic to the Grotesque, highlights the formalist stance of our Gallery and many of our artists. There are clearly any number of philosophical theories of art, such as the expressive and representational theories, but these only go so far in that many are too exclusive to serve as necessary conditions for art status. Although several theories now challenge its central premise, we feel that Formalism, through the ideas of Clive Bell, is a very coherent philosophical proposition, and one to which we predominantly subscribe. Of course, we would encourage everyone to exercise what Kant described as ‘disinterested contemplation’ when viewing our artworks, but formalism is a more structured idea of how we could appraise art. Bell’s theories developed as a reaction to the striking shifts in artistic practice during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with an art that gravitated towards abstraction. The aim of many in the avant-garde during this early period was not to capture the perceptual appearance of the world, but to making visually arresting designs based on their formal structure and organisation in areas such as colour, line, volumes, and the interaction of 2 and 3-dimensional space. Formalism could be delineated by the close interaction of interconnected parts within an artwork that gives it its structure and its form. For an example to illustrate the point, Ricardo Maya’s almost palimpsest canvasses have an apparently rigid structure but upon close examination possess such verve, depth and elasticity in their composition, that one can get subsumed in them and become totally unaware of their formal properties. At the BHC, we believe formalism is an egalitarian doctrine, and its theories have informed our perspective on the importance of moving beyond ‘mere’ aesthetics to a ground that is more democratic and inclusive. And thus, we are not classifying artworks by their pictorial or expressive content, or even their aesthetic or representational qualities, but by their possession of significant form. Take Sandro Barics’ Mixed media works, which often give the appearance of some Martian topography or Google earth-escape, but his works are always produced with a formality in the interaction of its constructed elements and materiality.

With Formalism asserting that anything can be classified as art so long as it possesses significant form, this has had the consequence of uplifting many hitherto disregarded art practices into an artistic milieu. In the contemporary sphere, it gives some artists who exhibit (what others may regard) as a bizarre creativity, the latitude to push their imaginative boundaries into uncharted waters and still be considered worthy of inclusion as 'art'. No doubt Bell would have appreciated many of our artists, whether these be of the angelic or the grotesque variety. Let us take another example to illustrate the point. ZhuYu, our cutting-edge Chinese artist, who produces a range of video and installation work, would not necessarily be considered an artist in the traditional appraisal of the term, as her works are far from what many would ascribe to a conventional aesthetic. Her physical and psychological journeys delve into (what she regards) as radical juxtapositions, which offer a dynamic political and civic commentary, as they develop into documentary, politics, and social anthropology. ZhuYu's formalist approach takes account of her creative presence as an artist, which is at once highly contemporary, yet is resonant of a timeliness born of a prototypical Chinese perspective. This is formalism in concept, construction, and presentation. Mirek Struzik has produced some truly stunning architectural gems, that bestride art and sculpture. Whilst changing perceptions in whatever location they are situated, the formalist stance of his work is a triumph of concept, design, and installation.

We at the BHC certainly appreciate that many of our artists fall outside any perceived notions of a rigid 'straitjacket' of formalism, as they delve into so many 'landscapes' of form. But all draw inspiration from the lineage of several avant-garde movements, and it is this relationship with the past that allows them to reflect and connect, in anything but a derivative fashion. Thus, we move beyond strict formalism, into a territory through which our critical evaluation and aesthetic judgement allows us to represent artists who may not themselves be formalists, but who wish to have their psychological, corporeal and/or phenomenological world's embodied in some creative form which stirs artistic sensibilities. So, from the Angelic Romanticism of Tim Kingsmill Brown's landscapes, to Dasha's geometric Constructivist works, Emma Coyle's dazzling pop-art portrait studies and Emmanuelle Revel-Pellet's Surrealism, via Jake Nason's startlingly gestural, almost performative style, we arrive at the appealingly grotesque, always humorous world, of Anna Mazzotta. With her wonderful carnivalesque cabaret scenes, redolent of Fin De Siècle Paris, Mazzotta is joyously conscious of the traditions of Soho and its artistic underbelly, where we base our first exhibition.

Cumulatively, our diverse, gender-balanced roster of artists derive inspiration from all sides and aspects of the human psyche or the natural world, and, whichever approach

they take, they all acknowledge the post-modern times in which we live; they are all true to themselves, their art, and their own personal aesthetic. But as Clive Bell himself acknowledged, no system of aesthetics that pretends to be based on an objective truth can have validity in everyone as emotions vary in each individual. His theory is based on how art can stir our aesthetic emotions through significant form and those thrilling raptures of the cold, white peaks of art; and the one thing we intend to do at the BHC above all else is to stir those emotions.