

In situ ex situ

Sarah Staton

Pine Cones, Newton's Tones: Sarah Staton's work at Mount Stuart

Sarah Staton is good at asking clever questions of places. Invited to make an exhibition which responded to the conditions found at Mount Stuart, she has settled on the conifers – old and new – and her work makes connections with where those conifers come from, and how they turn into pine.

Her exhibition works in a number of ways. It looks cohesive; all of a piece, made with the same material – pine – and with the same coloured wood stains. But it also looks outside of itself geographically, and chronologically. The pines at Mount Stuart come from various different regions of the world, their origins vaguely evoked by the geographical names on the map. Staton's pine was sourced at auctions, real and virtual, and comes from who knows where. The Pinetum is a concept which Staton associated with the Victorians (and probably with their urge to travel and to classify), and its Victorian origins are reinvigorated by a more recent programme of planting which is just now coming to maturity.

The Pinetum is like an inventory, or a museum, of different types. Staton shows five of them in her wall drawings. On the floor she proposes her own kind of inventory: of different ways of working with a table, opening it up to new heights, with variously turned legs, each different, but each responding in a way to its original source. These might be seen as grafts, which, grown on hardier root stock, push ahead of their parent, or as saplings which shoot up with little real strength. Certainly Staton is aware of the different speeds at which trees (are made to) grow, and how age affects strength.

Pine tables have long been part of the British domestic environment. At different times they have had different places: upstairs or downstairs, more or less desirable. In this case Staton has acquired tables which she dates to the last 20 or 30 years, and which she sees as rather typical of the interiors which we still encounter on a regular basis. The tables give her a ready-made human-scale (half or quarter height) and, knowingly or not, they also get round the question of plinths. In this way she neither needs to raise up nor protect the objects upon them. These 'objects' are discs cut from the surfaces of the tables themselves. Raised up like spinning plates on different kinds of turned legs, they are all kept up in the air, all at the same time.

Turning is an old fashioned craft, indissolubly linked to wood. In these works Staton has married something old with something new: wood-turning with computer profiling, so that the tables are cut with a degree of precision previously quite unattainable. They are cut for Staton to her drawn specifications, by a craftsman in Sheffield, whither her pine tables were delivered.

While the pine tables remain plain, even ghostly, the pine cones (pun intended, I guess) have been stained in bright fluorescent colours, brushed on by the artist. In

their material and shapes they take us back to their origins, the cones and the trees of the coniferous tree, but in their colour they remind us too of the modern day cone, or traffic bollard. But their profiles go one step further, for Staton, in making close connections to the Victorian Gothic which we find at Mount Stuart, and which crops up throughout Britain, and in this case notably in Sheffield, on its ecclesiastical architecture. Some of the bauble-like adornments on Staton's cones derive from specific steeples in her immediate environs.

Staton has also coloured the strips of wood, which have gone into making the seven 'paintings', which hang on the wall. All made of the basic timber lengths which are used for making traditional artists' stretchers, some of these works (the plain or non-striped ones) go back beyond the bulk of this work into 2005. All the rest has come together in the last few months and has been propelled by the Mount Stuart commission. The paintings hang over the map of the conifer plantings on the Estate, both alluding to and masking their origins.

One other table stands apart from the 'Coffee Table' and the 'Kitchen Table'. Not made of pine, nor stripped, it displays its uncertain and composite origins somewhat defiantly. The title – 'Alpine Table' - explains its presence among its pine kinsfolk, and its style (homely, Tyrolean) provides Staton with the key template from which to elaborate the stencil which removes its heart, like a giant lock or doorplate.

Over the last decade or so Sarah Staton has made a number of works and exhibitions which have focused on different kinds of display, finding her own hybrid styles which interweave high modernism and popular fashion; art and design; museums and art galleries; international and provincial. She has an acute eye and is a remarkably accurate observer of the details (corners, finishing, veneers etc), which push things to mean one thing or another. She knows about fashion, and she knows where to find its cheap or expensive versions.

Over ten years ago, in 1994, Staton made the exhibition which she links most closely with that which she has realised in Mount Stuart. It was called 'Joy, Joy, Joy', and it was shown at Hales, then a small gallery in South London. Here a combination of artistic homages (to an exhibition seen at Tate Liverpool which brought together Carl Andre, Sigmar Polke and Rosemarie Trockel by means of their common interest in the tile – hence the Delft tile), national signifiers (Dutch clogs), and original materials (the tree), allowed Staton to concoct a tableau which married folk art with museum art, countries with materials, history and anti-history.

Staton's art has returned to these kind of stir-ups: rich and allusive, multi-layered, making some things more obvious and some less. There must be a good degree of the instinctive about it, but there is plenty of knowing as well. She knows now how to respond to an invitation, how to make it work for her art, and for her exhibition, as well as for her host, and her ground is carefully laid. As this book demonstrates, Staton has found a *raison d'être* for being at Mount Stuart, and allowed it to enrich her existing fascinations with period style and material. Once again there is a kind of hidden artistic homage, this time to Gordon Matta-Clark, who cut circular holes

through buildings with vision and precision. Suspended between this world and the next, between nature and art, Staton's art works are somehow arrested, caught in the spotlight that is cast upon them, and part of a cycle which involves us all.

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