

Melanie Upton

Vague Terrain: Things Calling

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Fragment and rubble. Moments sourced, considered, collected and curated. Chance encounters, connected through their presence as moments of homage. Relics to both site and medium. Such is the evocation for Melanie Upton's *Vague Terrain: Things Calling*.

Particularly, the exhibition is a response to a 'vacant' construction site near Upton's studio. Scavenging the site, conceptually and physically, the result is a series of sculptural moments accumulated, a portrait of the construction site, an amalgamation of cast sculptural forms and materials sourced from the site.

There is a merging of artist's influence and that which influences the artist. The exhibition is not merely a mimetic reflection on the site scavenged, but is a union of collected objects and cast replicas. Combining these elements together, the exhibition is imbued with the natural qualities of these materials presented. Concrete, plaster, besser block, timber and clustered aggregate, all are naturally firm, physically quite dense. Through Upton's soft, contemplative touch, however, the materials are granted a sense of delicacy, heightening their malleable nature as construction materials, heightening the relationship created between art object and found rubble.

Construction is, after all, transformation. The transformation here is not merely one of form and function, but can be viewed as a renegotiation of the way in which these materials, and the site to which they refer, may be considered. This reconsideration is inherent within Upton's exhibition title, a title that is key to the moments arrayed upon the gallery floor. It is a title of possibility and magnetism.

Upton's '*Vague Terrain*' is an inversion of architect and historian Ignasi de Solà-Morale's '*terrain vague*', a term used to refer to the spaces of absence in the contemporary metropolis - the abandoned site, the empty block, the construction site. It is a sociological term, marking the lack of human concern as a core foundation to these moments within the urban scape.

As Upton highlights, however, the vacant, building-less block is anything but an empty void, nor is it lacking in human presence. As a site of calling, it can be viewed with a gaze of potentiality; it is a space with its own intrinsic nature and possibilities.

It is with this open possibility I view Upton's installation. Captured here are moments referring to the human element within these sites, alongside the natural aura already imbued in the objects and moments within, awaiting contemplative recognition.

As a site of contemplation, this is an exhibition that investigates our intrinsic desire to explore. It is an exhibition that speaks of the magnetic, the pull, as captured within *Totem - power in numbers*. A totemic cluster of rubble replica accumulated, a cluster of metamorphic plaster casts, elevated together. The piece emphasises the magnetic coming together of all these pieces, quite literally fusing these elements together upon the display pole.

As moments fused, this is a work that speaks of time captured, a thought essential to the overall exhibition, especially considering the construction site to which it refers. As sites of transformation, the exhibition, gallery and *terrain vague* are spaces defined by their nature as sites of transition and temporal flux. These are sites left within a moment of transitional awakening: as one building is demolished, as one exhibition is removed, plans are formulated, another is considered, and developed for a moment of transformation.

These are sites inherently linked to the '*open present*', a state Pierre Huyghe defines as "...open to any and all incidences that might occur."¹ They are sites which, through their malleable nature, become defined through their agency as sites of flux. It is within the '*open present*' that Upton's objects can be seen to be reflecting - responding to the open possibility of the vacant space and malleable objects within.

Take, as example, *Cement Void* and *Constructed Aggregate*. These two pieces together can be defined as a non-linear portrait of the site in flux, the '*open present*'. A concrete slab rests alongside photo documentation of its former residence, crested by a formation of constructed aggregate, Upton's hand at work. In this array rests a series of moments, and places - the former site in post-removal documentation; the concrete in its current gallery environment; the artist replica above. Each of these elements display different moments in time, connected here through the mechanisms of display. They exist presently as homage to past, and reflection towards their future contemplation.

As relics of temporality, it is important to consider these works in reference to their history and further reception. Describing the resonances, influence and structure of her *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Artistic Director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev refutes an archival construction of its histories, opting instead for a consideration of the exhibition, and its further manifestations, as a form of compost heap, as a union of non-hierarchical energies and moments.² It is within this mindset I view Upton's *Vague Terrain: Things Calling*.

As a site of flux, time is not linearly catalogued; this is not an archival form of documentation. The exhibition comes together as the physical and temporal compost heap, as a series of energetic matters, merging together through manipulation and organic progression, through the forces of site, time, and interpretation.

Text by Brendan McCleary.

¹ Pierre Huyghe, "Note of Intent" in Pierre Huyghe, *The Trial*, (Munich: Kunstverein; Zurich, Kunsthalle,

² Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Boiler Room Series: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev", Monash University, 11 August 2014. Lecture.