



Astrid Svangren: 'Before me: I roll in the show [...]'

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Maria Stenfors, London

Review by Marie d'Elbée

before me: I roll in the snow/ rotating/ raveling/ turned/ twisted/ to an expression of instance

behind me: peonies/ disassemble/ loosen up/ breaking down/ collapsing

beside me: enfleurage/ ointmentlike/ perfumed solids/ without body/ engulfed/ collected/ to a given

under me: loose materials/ mishmash/ knocking/ beating/ leaf buds/ opening/ chlorophyll/ watercolor/ unfolding/ fold in

over me: froth of sugar/ corals/ sea anemones/ jellyfish/ sea snails/ all is viewed/ lulling/ as long as it lasts

Astrid Svangren's poem above also forms the title of her exhibited works. The words trigger vivid, fragmented images, like long-buried sensations from another life. They are reminiscent of one's first exposure to nature, to movement, to the experience of colour and space, which leaves an irreversible impression.

The slashes confer a rhythm to the poem; evoking the editing process of memory itself, cutting out flashes from an oozing consciousness. In the works, fragments of waxy material, braided ribbons and horse hair entangle themselves, trapped in opalescent translucent plastic. The delicately organised hoardings seem to billow and shiver with a sense of urgency and suspense, owing to their fragility. This exhibition exudes raw sensitivity, suggesting the cosmological tension between space and matter.

I spoke to Maria Stenfors about her work with Astrid.

Marie d'Elbée: How did you and Astrid meet? Was there something in particular that made you decide to work with her?

Maria Stenfors: It was about three years ago, London was covered in deep snow. It was very difficult to get around and we had had a week with barely any visitors. She came in with a friend. We had a very intense conversation about art. She hadn't mentioned that she was an artist but it was clear that she knew very well what she was talking about. I remember we didn't agree on everything, but it was a very interesting talk. Two weeks later, I received a pdf of her work. I thought it looked great and it seemed natural to show her work when we had a group exhibition at the gallery a couple of months later. From then on we began to develop a very respectful

relationship and started working together. I very much enjoy our exchanges, the focus is clearly on art but we also get on very well as individuals.

She is one of the first artists that you chose to represent.

When I opened the gallery in 2010, I had decided to add artists gradually. For a while I worked with Yasmin Mueller, Julia Pfeiffer and Martin Gustavsson, then later came Michelle Deignan. Astrid Svangren was the fifth artist to be part of the gallery. Today there are nine gallery artists, following the addition of Mela Yerka, Dean Hughes, Lilah Fowler and Philip Newcombe. It has been a pleasant surprise to see new dialogues and collaborations arise between these artists who did not know each other before joining the gallery.

The work inhabits the gallery in a very organic way. Her installations seems to fold and unfold. They organise volumes of empty space which are outlined by scratched Plexiglass or the uneven edges of ragged silk. Materials are at times hanging, and at others seem to emerge from the ground. This makes me wonder how she works with the space, if the work was made in the gallery.

It wasn't made in the gallery but the way it is displayed strongly recalls her studio and the way she works there. There is an aspect of organised hoarding to her work, allied with the beauty of the experience threatening to collapse at any time. I remember when I started to unpack Astrid's work I was taking infinite precautions to manipulate the fragile materials, I was afraid that their delicate textures would collapse under my fingers. In contrast, I observed the calm assurance and familiarity with which Astrid was handling her artwork. It was by no means over precious: these were her daily objects and she shared a great level of intimacy with them. Also all the works and especially the suspended works (Astrid had asked me if it was possible to hang work from the ceiling) have a built in structure. The seams in the paper or fabric are not only decorative or part of the artwork but also a very crucial skeleton for the work to behave in the way that the artist has intended.

Are there any aspects of the exhibition that you find particularly successful?

I am very happy with our dialogue and the choices that we made together. I think the exhibition reveals successfully the conversation between the space and the works. The show appears as a stage set installed almost irrespective of the room that it is housed in. At points in the show, it is almost like the works are arrogantly avoiding you, and that you need to struggle to gain access to them. As the viewer moves through the exhibition, so do the works: the air vibrations generated by the movement of the viewer make his/her physical body a participant in the exhibition.

The idea of transformation is very apparent in the work. Is this something that you feel is important in Astrid's work?

The idea of the cocoon is very present. Astrid plays with its state of uncertainty, of not knowing how it will develop. Potent with those emotions, she is the alchemist of her own world of which we get glimpses through the exhibitions. The text and title of the show is crucial to the understanding of the show. It starts to reveal itself when facing the works and materials. All you need to do is to move to activate it.

Was there a kind of breaking point or internal surrender where you thought that the work was doing something very important?

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During the installation, we were unrolling and spreading out a train of paper across the room, and at one point, there was this moment when I realised what it was doing to space. It was a very strong feeling, one of those moment that make you realise how powerful art can be.

The gallery is launching a publication of Astrid Svangren's work to coincide with EC1/WC1 gallery day this weekend. The publication depicts images of exhibitions (Tracy Williams Ltd, New York and Christian Andersen, Copenhagen and also Wanås Konst, Sweden by Svangren) together with a beautiful new text by Cherry Smyth. It will be available during the late opening in the gallery on Friday 25th 6-8pm and during the Saturday opening from 12-8pm where they will be celebrating with gravdax and vodka!

