

## Beautiful Ruin: Christine Aaron

Christine Aaron approaches elegiac content through a lush materiality. Using wax, oxidized metal, mirror, wood, paper, and fabric, as well as encaustic, photography and printmaking, Aaron creates works that hint rather than extol. Her varied materials exhibit a delicate physicality, vehicles for meaning through their tangible presence. Playing opaque materials in tension with transparent illusionistic imagery, she manipulates her mediums in insistent ways, revealing content through process. Her method is investigative, exploratory, an act of finding rather than directing the work. Despite the strong, often heavy materials, the work maintains a sense of ethereal vulnerability. Memory, loss, and the beauty of the degraded and timeworn, all feature prominently in Aaron's work.

Trees, for Aaron, are a symbolic language. Acting as metaphors for souls, trees carry the imagistic content of the work and speak of the ineffable. They are representations of time passing, cycles of life hidden in the growth rings. Resembling people in a psychological drama, they stand witness to the private stories held within all our bodies. Silent and watchful, her forests become proxies—of families, communities, ancestors and descendants, the living and the dead. Like families, they can seem at once ominous and protective, diligent and attentive, safe and fearsome. In ghostly photographic images printed onto her many different surfaces, the trees are a constant presence.

Aaron also incorporates text directly onto the surfaces of most of her paintings, prints, and objects. Recognizable as longhand, yet barely readable under the degraded surface, the text acts as both a visual and conceptual form. The words might reference lost letters, words spoken into history, or thoughts parading constantly through our minds. The scripts appear personal, captured words hinting back at the intimacy of the narrative. The text swims in and out of the images, as though one is walking through Aaron's psychological forest while voices murmur all around. Although literally silent, these works seem to have sound emanating from them, of voices or trees rustling. Coming from outside or inside your body, from past, present and even future imaginings, the paintings whisper, as though reaching through time and space.

In the metal pieces, she repeatedly oxidizes the surface until ravaged and timeworn, as though they are discovered artifacts dug up in an abandoned ruin. This ruin reveals a narrative marred by time, its forgotten stories leaving only traces. The oxidation process literally ages the metal in the most direct interpretation of the passage of time, corroding the surface into pitted multicolored rust. The imprinted images of trees and written passages of text are embedded deep into the material so as to seem born up through it. Although she incorporates wax into the metal pieces, its presence is less felt—the metal's physicality and weight insists on its foregrounded role.

Wax is more explicit in the encaustic works on paper and panel, where time seems represented by veils of smoky haze. An obscuring rather than a reenactment of time's ravages, here images of trees and text are buried in layers of the filmy wax. Covered rather than excavated as in the metal works, they appear more like a memory or dream than a physical relic. The half hidden images reflect the brain's adaptive mechanism of remembering and forgetting. The ethereality of the imagery contrasts with the opaque certainty of the material surfaces, which insist on bringing us back to the corporeal effects of time's depredation. The tension between the mind's remembrances and the undeniability of the tangible body forms a core of content in Aaron's work.

Already a physical artist in her use of metal, wax, wood and other visceral materials, in this exhibition Aaron follows a natural evolution in expanding the work off the wall and away from the strictly two-dimensional. Her first foray into installation seems to have grown organically, as the materiality of the objects grows more assertive in its demand for space. In *Murmur*, she creates a smaller fluid environment within the larger gallery space. This development manages to expand the physicality of the work while maintaining the sense of fragility. The tree images have migrated onto sheer paper panels, hung from floor to ceiling and arranged in a loose grouping. The images shimmer and sway with the paper's movements as you walk among them, the paper adding another sound element reminiscent of leaves rustling. In another installation, *Echo* Aaron brings the tree literally into the work. Using tree trunks and thin wood slabs that stand at human scale, she inscribes the surfaces with text and clusters them around the space. Both installations feel as though one is walking inside the artist's imagined forest memory.

Aaron also incorporates actual sound for the first time, reflecting again the paintings' expansion beyond the two-dimensional by moving into three and four-dimensional space. Barely audible recordings of stories told to her are played quietly— as in the paintings nothing is frontal. Like a hum emanating from the work, this development reflects Aaron's desire, and that of the work itself, to move into real space in a created environment. To actually travel through the work in a more interactive and participatory fashion pulls the viewer into the story in a more experiential way. As though the paintings have come alive, we enter their magic realist space and move through it in physical time, surrounded by the artist's world rather than passively watching.

Christine Aaron's work feels novelistic, not in a linear sense, but in the way a novel unfolds in observed time. At first images of trees and rusted metal may seem simply familiar, beautiful, and seductive in their expression, until they begin to speak, to sway, to invite you into their midst. The theme of materials obscuring while subtly revealing appears throughout Aaron's work, as though her materials are a declarative scrim through which we are encouraged to view the immaterial. In viewing, we work backwards through them, following the pathway forged by the artist. In the process we find hinted narratives, glimpses of memory, moments lost to time. In the end, if we stay long enough, they may welcome us into a dream-like

exploration of time, memory and the nature of being. We cannot know the whole of the story, we see only through a glass darkly. Our own experience is left to fill in the lost parts. Expressed through a love of materials and a kind of ruined beauty, Aaron seduces us into her tactile and quietly haunting world.

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July 2013