

Exhibition Review

ELIZABETH MEAD

Signatures and Thoughts

Boliou Gallery, Carleton College

February 8 – March 6, 2016



Review by David Lefkowitz

When artist Elizabeth Mead talks about what makes a thing ‘sculpture’ she speaks of how it can only exist in relation to everything else- everything that is not sculpture. Similarly, when one comes upon emphatically tactile works of sculpture, like those in her recent show *Signatures and Thoughts*, though it may be a cliché to invoke a comparison to our ubiquitous immersion in a wired, virtual, hyper-mediated universe, its hard not to. In fact, reflection on this work sparks consideration of how curious it is that analog artifacts which were once considered normative now may stand out for their emphatic non-digital nature.

The exhibition pares spare drawings in handmade inks of hazy horizons presented as pages of open books with fragile little porcelain forms on sculpted shelves. The ‘signature’ of the title is a bookbinding term referring to folded sheets that make up the core of a book. The ‘thoughts,’ we can infer, are the clay sculptures.

Are these things more authentic, true, or real for their apparently more direct engagement of the senses compared to digitally derived pictures and forms? Maybe, but Art has always been a mediated experience- its in its nature to single out something for our attention and contemplation. How do we catalog hierarchies of mediation? What do these things convey about experience? This exhibition sparks such queries.



The artifice of Mead's work focuses attention on its specific materials' salient characteristics- the absorption of ink into paper, the tangible evidence of the pinch of fingers as they shape a thin wall of porcelain. At the same time the images and forms point to something else- microcosms of our engagement with space.

They serve as reminders that direct tactile material experience can still elicit wonder and fascination. The sculpted drawings and porcelain sketches quietly make a case for pleasures of attentiveness that are elusive in our habitually distracted state.

The drawings appear as investigations of space- miniature models of vastness. Some refer directly to a distant horizon, others, where the ink wash extends into the 'sky' allude to atmospheric conditions. All are bounded by the

rectangle of the picture plane- a human containment, a selective isolation, of a segment of the world.

In these drawings Mead employ at least two types of perceptual sleight-of-hand. They hover between reference to landscape and pure abstraction that revels in the materiality of ink and paper. They read simultaneously as image and object. They cannily suggest the open pages of a book, but closer inspection reveals the illusion of that initial impression. They are 'merely' two sheets of paper each folded in the center and curving back from the faux spine where they meet.

These works assert a spirit of curiosity and a comfort level with uncertainty and the provisional. The porcelain pieces do as well.

They appear as vessel fragments, or forms caught in an early state- not quite a thing yet- in mid-formation. They appear as models of early efforts to delineate space- rudimentary articulations of barriers between inside and outside, nature and culture. Yet they are displayed in an assertive way, accorded significance through the formality of the presentation. The porcelain thoughts are regally situated on dynamically shaped polygonal shelves scaled precisely to accommodate the delicate clay forms.



The purposeful pairings of these two groups of work both function as a conversation and inspire conversation. Mead has stated that her approach to sculpture starts with the idea of space. This stark, minimal installation directs such a focus. When talking about the ink drawings, Mead has found that the particular features of each one are largely contingent on the absorption rates of the different inks' interaction with the paper. Absorption rates in the work may vary from viewer to viewer, but Mead has created a situation to encourage a long, lingering encounter.