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in a world where you are possible

CHRISTINE KESLER

DEC 17 - JAN 17

NOMA GALLERY

by Carol Anne McChrystal and Keturah Cummings

Christine Kesler's solo show at NOMA, "in a world where you are possible," posits that the "tension of the work lies on the possibilities of interpersonal communication created by this unstable language as well as the physical relationships established by the installation." [1] The following conversation between Keturah Cummings and Carol Anne McChrystal aims to unpack this claim.

Keturah Cummings: What really stood out for me was the use of recurring shapes and forms in Kesler's work. The titles indicate that a lot of those shapes are supposed to be stupas, which are mound-shaped Buddhist temples. Some of them are more phallic, some of them are a little bit pointy on top, and some of them have pieces of the Buddha in them. Here, the forms resemble archways, points of entry, phalluses, and yonic shapes. They also remind me of Isaac Lin's work in which he borrows very specific religious references and renders them abstract.

Carol Anne McChrystal: I get to this notion of religion as well, but in a different way. The repetition of pink mounds, teardrops, and gem shapes throughout the paintings as well as through the installation hints that Kesler is trying to force all the elements in the piece into the same shape in a methodic or meditative way. In this reiteration, the shapes and images become visual homonyms for one another: the methodical implementation of these visual homonyms depicts a mystical experience through the act of making and contemplation. Kesler alters the altar, substituting one shape for another image. Ultimately, this action manifests the artwork as the remnant of a sacred place.

KC: I think that this alter/altar idea is exemplified best through Kesler's use of the teardrop shape. Kesler references an interest in poetry, where words can function more associatively, less concretely. The teardrop shapes operate in this way—much more effectively than the stupas even. For example, there is a moon image on paper cut into a teardrop shape, a picture of a woman whose face is cut then folded down the middle to create a teardrop shape, and also the walls are covered with little teardrop shapes cut from graphite covered paper that are then arranged individually on the wall to flow from one part of the composition to another.



stillness is the move/power blockage, 2009 (detail); mixed media; installation view, NOMA Gallery. Courtesy of the Artist.

She makes the viewer aware of how the gallery space is a container for her precisely arbitrary meditation. It's clear that she intends to hold the viewer's gaze and force it around the space, utilizing the physical peculiarities of the gallery.

KC: In a document published by the gallery, Kesler references giving the viewer agency in that way, but I feel like that statement isn't entirely true because—she exercises control. The work demonstrates a command over the space.

CAM: This "command" happens literally in the relationship between the installation of the artworks and the space—the meticulous execution of gestures and mark-making that result in crystallized human labor: lengths of ribbon tied and retied in bows, stones wound with layers of golden thread, tiny drawings composed of tiny careful marks. This sort of command compelled me to get down on the ground with the work. To sit, inspect, be quiet and think. That's really hippy-

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CAM: I agree. The movement of the individual elements through the gallery space works in a similar way to the poetry and language you reference. The installation *stillness is the move/power blockage* (2009) operates in the logic of speaking one sentence using five different languages, the words mishmashed together in an arbitrary order. It comes together to form another, bigger thought. Language came into play a lot for me here.

KC: She additionally uses language outright— there are small pieces of text scattered throughout the paintings.

CAM: But the way that she uses language is sort of ungraspable. Language employed to get to something that's outside of language—something to which we don't have immediate access. The thought that the work aims to demonstrate is outside of language, but it's only intelligible through the use of language itself. It's just like poetry.

KC: I'm going to puke. I hate always having to make that comparison—it's very limited.

CAM: But not all art is poetic in this particular way—it's just a succinct way to describe what's happening in this work. It's almost as if she's not even after the poetry, she's after the pauses in between. It has something to do with cadence and meter.

KC: Oh yeah! I definitely thought about cadence in relation to this work as well.

CAM: Pacing through the individual elements isn't always the same. By resting, leaning, draping and attaching sculptural elements decidedly on the quirks of the gallery's architectural details, she subtly forces the viewer to find the meter she establishes throughout the work.



stillness is the move/power blockage, 2009 (detail); mixed media; installation view, NOMA Gallery. Courtesy of the Artist.

dippy, but I did it. It felt inappropriate in the gallery.

KC: [uncomfortable laughter]

CAM: The solitary video *Salt Point* (2009) ties the show together for me in a really succinct sort of way. The fact that the forms that appear in the installation repeat in the video reinforced and strengthened the rest of the show. There's a pile of rocks in the video, there's a pile of rocks in the gallery. There are analogues. A woman's voice narrates over and over again on top of moving images of the tide's ebb and flow: "I think about what I'm gonna say. I write it down. I practice what I'm gonna say. I think about what I'm gonna say and I practice." This reiteration mirrors the logic of the show. The video talks about the relationship between making and thinking. It is a literal translation of the cast-wax hands in the installation.

KC: Really? I don't think the video works. There isn't any mystery in the video. It's heavy-handed and a lot less interesting than the other work. Technically I agree with you, but her use of gems, glitter, mirrors—which are all kind of tired symbolic forms by now—are utilized in the installation in a more compelling or strategic way. However, the use of the ocean waves in the video is sincere. It's just the same as when someone takes a videotape of the road out of the window while driving. Everyone has done that, and because everyone has, there's no question about why it's used—the viewer knows that it's a strategy to get a specific reaction. It just isn't as effective as the other work. The video is an anomaly or an afterthought. There is no other work like it in the show.

CAM: I thought of it more as a footnote to the show. It's a little drawing that helps the viewer find a route. I think that the use of the contemplative ocean as an image works. Like the road videos you mention, and photographs of sun-flares, it's dull and meaningless. It's making an image for the sake of making an image. The world doesn't need more images like that!

KC: This is the problem for me—after working so hard with the installation, the video doesn't offer much to work with or for. It's kind of just there...and so is the prescribed reaction.

CAM: Do you think that that's an interesting space? Kesler asks the viewer to really focus on an object or image and, at once, asks the viewer to contemplate a redundant sort of image like the tide? The question at hand with these elements seems to be, "I want to create stuff, I want to make art, but I need an excuse, I need a reason." The work asks over and over again if it's okay to make things, wonders if it's okay to be an artist and what is it to be a maker. These are the same kinds of questions that poetry and religion ask. It's a fascinating conundrum: look at this work that asks the viewer to be contemplative, but then the dumb and blank video of ocean speaks to the notion that even your contemplative gesture is limited and mediated by the cultural production of meaning.

"in a world where you are possible" is on view at [NOMA Gallery](#) in San Francisco through January 17, 2010.

[1] See exhibiton press release:

<http://www.nomagallerysf.com/exhibition/InAWorldWhereYouArePossible/index.html>

Keturah Cummings and **Carol Anne McChrystal** make up the San Francisco-based collaborative group [Nightmare](#)

City, a publication house that is interested in simultaneously looking forward and backward through all forms of the obsolete, passé, outmoded and idle.

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