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Alice Browne: Found  
Tintype Gallery  
24 January - 23 February 2019

Midway through her exhibition 'Found' at Tintype Gallery, Alice Browne and I discussed her work, introducing it through the 1973 children's book 'Seawater and the Dragon' by Luciana Chetwynd and her children. Briefly, little Seawater climbs the mountain above his village to discover a depressed dragon and a cave of nightmarish beasts. His Dad the stonemason is instructed by the Mayor to create a suite of gargoyles so Seawater convinces him to use the beasts, seeing as they sleep during the day anyway. During the unveiling of the sculptures, the dragon is furious with the villagers who won't eat the extravagant cake and he explodes into fireworks. Everyone is incredibly impressed. He goes on to become a huge tourist attraction while Seawater becomes the town's hero.

(Jillian Knipe) - So Seawater has to walk up a mountain and into a cave which, of course, is brimming with symbolism. I understand Alice, your encounters with caves are a significant influence on this series of works so could you talk us through these.

(Alice Browne) - I enjoy getting out of London, going climbing and seeing things that don't have a straight edge; that don't live in rectangles. I was in Mallorca on a rainy day so visited a cave, which I hadn't done in a very long time. It was a typical admission and tour fee site and it brought back childhood memories of seeing caves in the south of France; the vivid, colourful stage lighting, which I thought at the time were the cave's real colours. The rock surface also becomes more colourful from algae growth in reaction to the heat and moisture we introduce. I started making new work featuring some of the natural and unnatural colours from these encounters.

When I'm thinking about making new work it's not like I go into the studio and think 'aha! I'm going to make work about this'. Over a period of time I just thought about those colours, about the surfaces of the rocks, the experiences and expectations of those spaces. You enter the cave and go down into this weirdly constructed, man-made walkway. And then you exit through the gift shop where you can buy things that have absolutely no relevance to the cave you just visited.

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**(JK) - We talked about perceptual change in the book, like when Seawater sees monsters in the mountainous landscape. There's also the ongoing, physical changes in mountains and caves such as stalactites and stalagmites which grow in response to the cave's conditions. They take centre stage in your painting 'Mighty-Connect-Discovery (Spaghetti Factory)' (2018). Perhaps you could tell us about them and also the role of time.**

(AB) - The newest part of the cave has these thin and delicate stalactites that grow really slowly (and look like spaghetti). The spindly, stalagmite forms at the bottom of the canvas are almost a reverse paint drip. I made them while thinking about the dripping water coming from above, like the drip of paint creating the form itself. I don't necessarily know where the painting is going to go and sometimes it becomes a literal act of building.

I thought about looking into spaces that have unusual darkness or depth, where fear mixes with wonder and your imagination can take over. We were talking earlier about how you find that in caves, in mineshafts, but also just looking down a tube train tunnel. Your perceptual experience becomes secondary and your physical awareness is heightened.

In 'New-----Place' (2018) I wanted to create a painting that didn't have a defined edge except for the edge of the painting. This indeterminate space has a drifting clock, tape measure and yardstick, suggesting how we give experiences human-constructed values and measurements. So, it's to do with a celebration of something that is not yet determined or measured. It's also a celebration of paint and all the wonderful things its subtle layers can do.

In some works I've used collage as a way of creating an additional visual step – such as a mono-print where I've drawn around my hand. It reminds us that this space is an illusion, whereas you, me and the added surface are very much physically present.

The hands refer to prehistoric cave painting, connecting to our origins. Not just asking how far back can we go and when did art start, but also conveying the idea of a universal human who existed before nations did. The hands reflect our desire to physically connect. I wanted to touch the cave, but wasn't supposed to. In the same way you might want to touch artworks. We desire to take a bit of it away with us. To some extent that's what the exhibition title 'Found' is referring to. It's not just something seen. It's something found and therefore, perhaps, I own it now.

**(JK) - The sense of dualism in the paintings has me thinking of the original Syrian story of Aladdin. The cave is a place of entrapment whereas, in the Disney version, it's a place of hidden treasures. And then there are man-made caves - mines - which are access points to our treasures of contemporary living; gold, slate, tin, etcetera. Perhaps you could talk about your caves as places of entrances, exits and treasure, especially 'Beneath/Before] FeSz' (2018) which has a reference to fool's gold.**

(AB) - I was thinking about man-made cavernous spaces like a crypt or sewer while making that painting. Interestingly, much information about the inhabitants of ancient Pompeii was discovered by analysing the contents of its sewers. Not to put anyone off the work, but I was thinking about a radioactive pile of shit. It could be something utterly useless or it could be incredible because it contains all this information for future historians about what we were doing in 2019.

Recently I remembered the 'Ultima Underworld' video game where you travel through caves and collect runestones from ancient civilisations. You never know what's around the corner, like walking through a labyrinth, like starting a painting. You just go with it and the possibilities are exciting. We don't know what's going to be precious in the future.

**(JK) - Speaking of precious things, I'd like to talk about your toes! You have a hand-crafted a collection of plaster toes titled 'Souvenirs' (2019). These are a reference to the Rodin sculpture 'Les Bourgeois de Calais' (1884-1889) which left a strong impression on you from childhood.**

(AB) - I decided to make an object in the shape of a toe, recalling 'The Big Toe' by Georges Bataille. It connected to my memory of experiencing the Rodin sculpture - their hands and feet are overwhelmingly enormous and I remember touching the toes. So these plaster toes are like the disconnected toes of a Rodin sculpture that you can take home! They symbolise our connection to the earth and ability to stand upright. Also, thinking of the burghers of Calais, they demonstrate how easily we are displaced and that the ground we have lived on gives us a constructed identity.

**(JK) - 'Seawater and the Dragon' is something of a mixed blessing in the end because even though the dragon beats his loneliness and depression, he becomes some sort of circus freak. Meanwhile, Seawater encourages children to laugh at their nightmares despite dreams being valued as a very important analytical tool. Caves and our involvement in the natural world also bring about a mixed blessing when it comes to scarce resources.**

(AB) - It's strange because it's a children's book without a very happy ending. The great part for me is the beginning when the boy climbs up and sees the rock formations shifting in his imagination and he meets all these weird monsters. Then he brings them into town where they're commodified. Taking things out of their natural habitat transforms them. It doesn't necessarily ruin them. The monsters are all happy in their new existence.

Extracting natural minerals and turning them into something else, like paint for example, is kind of weird because we don't necessarily think about those underground resources and the people that have worked and still work in those industries. They're so much better connected than we are and the idea of actually getting our hands dirty feels quite distant. Even when I was mixing the plaster for the toes I wasn't really thinking -

what is this gypsum I'm using and where does it come from. So much of what you get has been resourced and it's so easy to not think about it in terms of a natural form in its own habitat.

The book essentially symbolises all that. Yes, the central figure is a depressed, displaced dragon but he's wonderful and incredible and he hates wastage.

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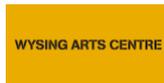
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