

Neo-Regionalism – Place Memory / Oleg Polounine

Oleg Polounine's first solo show explores nature and recollection, generics and specifics, snapshots and experiences. In *Neo-Regionalism - Place Memory*, Polounine shifts in direction, exploring objects that represent something, rather than just being objects in their own right (as seen in his previous work). Polounine's sculptural forms are representative of something else, both tangible and intangible.

Taking inspiration from nature, Polounine creates sculptural forms influenced by curiosities of nature - a waterfall, a coastline, a bay. Polounine has always been interested in nature itself, and so in this exhibition combines both his experience as a person and an artist, bringing his two interests together.

Polounine's sculptures have a dual purpose. Although they are influenced by specific places that the artist has visited or experienced, they have been titled generically in order to allow visitors an insight. By providing us with a generic opportunity for interpretation, Polounine hopes to elucidate in all of us a specific memory or feeling we might have to these natural phenomena. Instead of seeing just a waterfall, or joining Polounine's waterfall experience, our memory might instead harp back to a waterfall visited when we were just a young child, or even last week. Not only a specific memory, the artist wants a feeling to be conjured, how do we feel when standing in front of a waterfall, and how do we feel when standing in front of a sculpture of a waterfall? Polounine's works without a place specific title (such as *Hope, Freedom* and *Dream*) aspire to aid us in evoking that feeling or memory.

Polounine's palette has become naturalised. In previous work, the artist was interested in unusual colours that could have only been created by humans, it was clear that a human decision had been made in the mixing of shades. In *Neo-Regionalism - Place Memory*, the colours are derived exclusively from nature, aided with photographs Polounine took during his experiences on-location. These sculptures are 'snapshots' of a place. Like photography, they are almost flat (perhaps as each panel of metal are exactly the same width). It is as if we are looking at Polounine's photographs of places. A translation has been made, similarly to how a photograph may attempt to translate a moment to memory, Polounine's experience of nature is translated through sculpture to us.

This link to photography, and Polounine's deliberate intent for viewers of his work to have a personal, unique experience that conjures a memory or feeling is reminiscent of Roland Barthes seminal text *Camera Lucida*. In the text, Barthes explores the notion of the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is what most people can read into the artwork (the cultural interpretation that could be understood by anyone), whereas the *punctum* is the element of the work that establishes a direct and personal

relationship with whoever is viewing it. Polounine's sculptures encourage us to find this *punctum* when we stand in front of them.

Estuary Triptych tells a story of tides and cockle collecting and references ideas of art history and religion with use of the triptych (and diptych in *Light Diptych*). Polounine's triptych shows the tides from high to low from left to right. The square dips below, between and above the water line reference the different levels of the estuary mud that Polounine observed in his cockle-collecting sojourns. It is clear that the difference is in the details, the blue of the water is more yellow in the left hand panel, representing sunrise. It is more white in the middle panel, showing midday. And the right hand panel has a touch of red to illustrate the sunset. What's more, the use of panels in diptychs and triptychs take us back in time to their use in churches as religious icons and the opening and closing of different panels based on the seasons of the Christian year.

In *Neo-Regionalism – Place Memory*, Polounine constantly references our own New Zealand art history. The insertion of Neo-Regionalism into the exhibition's title speaks to Polounine's research into New Zealand regionalist artworks and artists. The artist writes, "I am fascinated by how a place's geography (light and landscape), and its people (social values and history), can influence how one experiences and represents a place." Polounine spins New Zealand regionalism on its head (hence the 'neo'?), as the images usually conjured up by a conversation on New Zealand regionalism are those of Colin McCahon, Rita Angus, and Toss Woollaston. In particular, *Bay*, reminds me of Colin McCahon's 1957 *French Bay* in the Auckland Art Gallery. What Polounine delivers, however, is completely different to the regionalists. It is sculpture, flat, minimal and sophisticated. I'd argue that it conjures those same feelings that past New Zealand regionalists did. Neo-regionalism is an apt description of Polounine's work.

Polounine comments that Jill Trevelyan's biography of Peter McLeavey was essential as an entry into understanding New Zealand art history. Polounine's inclusion in the gallery has spiked his interest in the history that came before him, and the text provided a snapshot of New Zealand's art history he could work from. Polounine's interest in both the natural, and the art world, is highly evident in his work and gives his audience a new way of looking at both our art history and our experience of nature.

Lucy Jackson

Oleg Polounine was born in Russia in 1988, and moved to New Zealand in 1996. He studied at the Elam School of Fine Art, where he got his Masters in 2011. Oleg lives in Auckland and works from his K Road studio.