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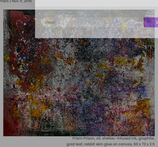
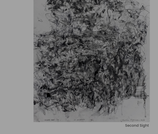
Christina McPhee

by Robert Summers | Nov 9, 2016



Christina McPhee, still image, installation at Pomona College, 2016. Digital print, coated satin gicee on canvas, 18 x 72 x 2.5 in.

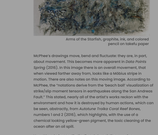
I'm looking at *Second Sight* (2015) by Christina McPhee, which carries the same title as her solo exhibition currently on view at Cerritos Art Gallery. This work is an abstract, dense and expressive work on paper: there are marks upon marks, which create a layered effect. There are repetitive brushstrokes that create structural and biomorphic forms, and there are interspersed moments of white space that allow the eye and the mind to begin to move. In particular—to that the foreground, middle ground, and background trespass each other. In viewing this non-figurative image, it nevertheless surfaces a body, which I will get into more detail below. In closely looking at it, I could simultaneously hear Matthew Angelo Harrison's *Rhythm Incarnate* (2016) and Kara Hearn's *Sweet Nothing* (2016). And it was in this moment and movement that a memory was evoked—what Roland Barthes calls a "punctum"—the sudden recollection that punctured me, that created a hole that drew me into a memory.



Second Sight

I am a young boy sitting on the floor—decades ago—my mother is writing a letter, in the silence of the space we occupy, I can hear the scratching sound of her pencil against the paper. There is a fan, a decrepit across the white, peeled ceiling. From a Biblical standpoint, there were sand—up pints, and there were pauses. At points the movement stopped, and then immediately started again, the pen point cut deep and moved towards tender moments. Here, back at the present, I look at the work in the image, in front of it I have a second sight—another vision. In many ways, McPhee's work is about the body, and it is about the body in relation to memory. And this is what I pick up on—in what pains me up and carries me away—and I am shuttled back and forth, all the while moving toward the Open that we call the future. Once left with the question, what moments that turn into memories, encounters—in a word, what moments that turn into archives?

Arm of the Starfish (2016), there are further traces of marks that fill the surface, but this time are various hues of blue (connoting the ocean?) and there is also text, which reads between an abstract background—and it is important to note that the handwriting blends in perfectly with the abstract lines that create the total image.



Arms of the Starfish, graphite, ink, and colored pencil on tatami paper

McPhee's drawings move, bend and fluctuate: they are, in part, about movement. This becomes more apparent in *Data Points Spring* (2015). In this image there is an overall movement, that when viewed from afar, looks like a Mobius strip or a Klein bottle. There are notes and writing throughout the image. According to the artist, this piece "is a map of the Ridgecrest earthquakes and the aftershock moment known in earthquakes along the San Andreas Fault." This stated, nearly all the artist's works reckon with the environment and how it is affected by human relations—and how can't be seen, abstractly, from *Autotune Tracks Coral Reef Bones*, Numbers I and II (2016), which highlights, with the use of a chemical-looking yellow-green pigment, the toxic cleaning of the ocean after an oil spill.

Here, I turn to her aesthetically sensitive paintings, such as *Transmediated Cloud Cluster* (2016) and *Cloud Cluster* (2016), which are many representations of her latest work. These works are also lyrical and expressive. *Prism Poem* seems to be an explosion of brilliant colors radiating outward, beauty in destruction? Some of her paintings are expressive in another way, they are energetic in an outward way—aimed toward the viewer, as if to say neither there is a marvelous array of colors beaming from a prism.

Data Points Spring, gouache, ink, china marker and colored pencil on tatami paper 29 x 19 in

With the use of so much dark drawing materials, such as oil paint, graphite, ink, and charcoal added, there is a melancholy all around most of the art. In the darkest aspects of any of McPhee's work, there is a sense of loss, and this is where I am going to say that should not be read in any binary way (her work is too complicated for that), but rather in a way that highlights the "beside"—how they inadvertently against each other and what such a juxtaposition can highlight. According to the press release, "[McPhee's] work takes on violence, rage, sonic exuberance, and stillness, from a 'post-colonial' experience of community." which we see from the dark and violent marks that are juxtaposed with the bright and almost neutral colors. To be sure, this raises visualities and theories, which I mention above gesture to above, and what I said, second-wave queer theory.

Aiming toward a closing of this rich body of work, I should like to surface McPhee's artwork and how it surfaces the body, as well as what I call "queer abstraction"—which doesn't denote LGBT identities or sexual object choices, but rather the works affordance to open up to ways of seeing peculiarity that are not aligned with heteronormative standards of abstract art and its "proper" histories and theories.

All of the images in "Second Sight," I recall the image of feminist artist Carolee Schneemann's *Up To And Including Her Limits* (1974-76), in which Schneemann is swung around while she makes marks on paper,[1] which traces the movement of Mary Kelly, or Rhyses Kaskins's *[In]Nervous Vaginy Painting* (1995), in which she paints, as the title suggests, with her vaginal muscles, both artists critiquing dominate abstract expressionism,[2] indeed, there is a queer performativity to McPhee's work, which I think of Jack Pierson's *Wonderful Drawing* (You Fucking) of 1978, in which he and others would piss on copper plates to portray them, which of course we see in Jackson Pollock's dripping, as a critique of masculine binaries of Jackson Pollock flinging paint with his mechanical dick.[3] This said, I read Christina McPhee's work as drawn performance—and queer feminist ones at that (Schneemann, Kelly, Kaskins, Pierson, Harrison, Hearn, and more recently Ei Arakawa). As I argue here, these works become according to Eve Sedgwick, "queer is an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning"—which relate to McPhee's work as whole.[4] Queer is about flux, flow and dispersal of all monoliths. And feminism, as practices, which is usually read as always the tiny history of women, which is actually not, as we see in the feminist practices in the mid-1970s. Thus, McPhee's work can be seen as an enactment of a queer-feminist abstraction—and an abstraction that deserves more than just a formal reading, but rather a deep engagement into philosophical and theoretical ideas.

"Second Sight" is an exhibition that highlights how abstraction can be done today without relying on the usual tropes. It shows that everything from environmental to sex and gender concerns can be reckoned with in very powerful and visually compelling ways. McPhee's work is not for the faint of heart, it is not behind a lie, and we can, even in dark times, and with daunting issues, overcome and move forward. In the end, this is an inspiring exhibition—one that should not be missed.

[1] Please see my unpublished paper "Queer Abstraction" on academia.edu.

[2] See Amelia Jones, Body Art: Performing the Subject (Minnesota: University of Minneapolis Press, 1998).

[3] In 2015, Christina McPhee combined footage she shot at oil fields in California with a remix of Carolee Schneemann's film *Fuse: Joy* (1964), in the short video, *MEAT OIL JOY PAINT: A Tribute to Carolee Schneemann*, recently shown in October 2015 in London, at Electrowerkz Hospital, curated by the Center for Visual Music, Los Angeles.

[4] Eve Sedgwick, Tendencies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8. I am also drawing on my unpublished paper, "Queer Abstraction."

"Second Sight: New Work" by Christina McPhee

September 8 to November 12, 2016 (Wednesdays 11-4PM

Book Release: Saturday, November 12, 2016 from 6-9PM

Cerritos Art Gallery 1110 Alondra Blvd, Norwalk, CA 90650

http://www.cerritosgallery.com/

Closing & Book Release: Saturday, November 12, 2016 @ 6-9PM
In addition to the exhibition catalog for SECOND SIGHT, the publication will include a new artist book, co-published with Heather McPhee: A Commonplace Book, published by Punctum Books and edited by Eileen A. Joy, with contributions by Judith Rodenbeck, Ina Blom, Phil King, Fraser Ward, Matthew Fuller and others.

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