

**STAINS.FRESCOES III RIVERBED**

**SUE PEDLEY**

**M A Y 5 - 2 8 1 9 9 4**

**INSTITUTE *of* MODERN ART**

044

## The Broken Circle

*The mandala, the word means circle, ...is a perennial balance of force whose beginning is in its end, whose end is in its beginning.*

*- The Tantric Way*

*In order to advance, I walk the treadmill of myself.*

*- Jean Tardieu*

Sue Pedley's work is an expression of participation in time and space. It can be conceived of as a practice which traverses various sites and states, casts off as much as it keeps and thus adheres more to a sense of play and replay than to the promise of plenitude. Her practice emphasises the relationship between the artist and her *work* in terms of its active phase rather than its issue. She brings this vital aspect, usually confined to the studio into the gallery, unfolding the physical moment of herself in the space, making.

Sue Pedley's work can be explored in terms of its expression of time and tactility as dominant over the completion of a visual/conceptual project. Her work is not determined to deliver an Idea so much as a "record of engagement"<sup>2</sup>. It simultaneously poses the question of representing practice - the *being* of the work - and shows the becoming/emergent object as this being.

### *(i) The Phenomenology of Practice*

The will of practice is not aesthetic, that is, it does not necessarily have an object in sight. Thought as interminable activity, practice can't be apprehended, measured, or (as it is only equivalent to itself) represented.

The idea of art however, involves the coercion of practice to stop and consider itself, to reflect. Art stabilises the phenomena of the imagination in space, even as the imagination resists coming to rest on a final object. In these terms, art delivers the past-present of

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<sup>2</sup>Ooms, Anne, "Time and Touch in the work of Elizabeth Day" *Agenda* Mar 93  
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imaginative work. This intermittence of engagement and reflection might serve to delimit the practice from the project of making.

Sue Pedley's medium is plaster or plaster in relation to another material. She makes her objects by a repeated moulding in sand, or by pouring plaster into other objects; flower pots, plastic bags, hot wax. Her plaster assays substantiate a sense of tactility and always appear in series or generations: detritus, tracings, ephemera.

From pendulous, plaster-covered muslin bags to her odd spindles and small cast multiples, her objects seem like working drawings, yet to arrive at an ideal form. They are documents of spaces and gaps or moments in time.

In the *intertidal zone* and *tide*, her use of plaster recalled the aesthetics of the seaside; bleached drift wood, honeycombed coastal sandstone, marks of the transferences of sand and water. Terracottas, yellows, reds, and emeralds emerge from the plaster in other works. Some work is discarded after being shown and some is broken up and left in the studio until it reappears in a new guise. Broken chunks of her past work are embedded in the new like armoury.

Pedley's persistence with a single material reveals her enjoyment of plastic experimentation. Plaster has no implicit value, but is used to trace shape and fill out negative space. Plaster has a 'nothingness' and a promise about it in the same way as does a blank sheet of paper (indeed chunks of plaster display sketches and working drawings around Sue's studio), and it can be broken down and reused. With the simple ingredients of lime, sand and water, it is a material which has a fascinating transmutability. The drying plaster activates a dormant energy - it goes hot and hard and a centrifugal force draws embedded colours out to the surface.

The process of repeatedly moulding in sand emphasises the generational aspect of the work and suggests the value placed on invested labour. Pedley sets parameters for her practice which she then inhabits intensely. Her studio is the space for happening on an intriguing process, a spontaneous occurrence, diversions, random variations and mishaps. She folds chalk, dyes and other objects into

the plaster mix, anticipating the various appearances of stains and marks on the white.

The piece which ultimately appears in the gallery stems from a lineage of work. In her studio, a figure eight in two shades of bright orange thread, rapidly stitched onto a small square of hessian, adorns the wall. This is but one of several small tapestries Pedley stitches on her train ride to work - documents of time spent.

This tracing of time evokes the unbridgeable gap which opens up between the image and imagined at the intersection of representation and practice.

In his essay on the sublime, Jean-Francois Lyotard explores the specific relationship between the Idea and representation in this context.<sup>3</sup> Lyotard's sublime has little to do with notions of imaged beauty (where the energy of representation is already exhausted), it is expressed instead by the resonance of that which is not shown, but is demonstrated by the practice of representation. According to Lyotard, the artists project is to make manifest the unrepresentable *absolutes* of the human condition, despite the impossibility of finally being able to claim the true object.

The aesthetic of showing vs hiding and practice vs completion organised by the logic of exhibitions, tend to suppress time and thus the phenomenology of practice. The gallery is a 'proper' place in Michel de Certeau's terms, a place that can "serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it"<sup>4</sup>, a place in which the spatial dominates the temporal. De Certeau contrasts this with the (improper) tactics of everyday practice which belong not to a place but to time; "a tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance."<sup>5</sup> In this, the relationship between the spatial and temporal is intensified as inescapably contiguous. Time 'overflows' the logic of space and thus the volition of practice can be seen to access the 'new'

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<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, J-F "Presenting the Unrepresentable: The Sublime" *Artforum* April 1982

<sup>4</sup> de Certeau, M "General Introduction" *The Practice of Everyday Life* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, pxix

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

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within that which was already prescribed. In shifting focus from the 'capital' to the labour of articulation, cohesive spaces are broken open.

## (ii) The Broken Circle

Thinking about work and practice as vital principles one is inevitably drawn at some point to the circular and the circuitous. The circle analogises practice as a certain universality of process. As an archetypal, primal image and motif, the circle represents the metaphorical extremes of the subject and object. It is the sun, the earth and the nuclear motif of the self. It expresses wholeness and integrity, but also fragility and the impossibility of perfection.

The perfect circle thus becomes a sublime image, an exemplary representation, enclosing itself in perfect, immaculate secrecy - delimiting itself from the outside;

*The circle is theological; it describes the way God giving to Nature gives Genius to the Poet who gives speech to men who give thanks to God...the circle also describes the logic of a certain pure morality, the morality that resides in the idea of mans freedom to imitate the Freedom of God, or the Sun.<sup>1</sup>*

Returning to Pedley's hurriedly stitched figure eight, something of the analogy of the circle and practice is disrupted. In the series of intermittent stitches, the perfect orb is transgressed, the dynamics of practice, of agency, become inscribed in the image. Because this 'improper' circle takes shape in *relation* to its archetype, the departure from the sign of the absolute is all the more emphatic (recall the effect of the stain appearing on the white plaster). Fixed space becomes marked with the labyrinthine patterns of practice and the shifting positions of inside and out are brought into relief.

-Abby Mellick

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<sup>1</sup>Klein, Richard, "Kant's Sunshine" *Diacritics* vol 11 1981 p32