

## Phone App to Fine Art: Southern Stories by Mary Crenshaw

I was first drawn to Mary Crenshaw's work at *Thirst*, a group show of just four artists emerging from BA and MA degrees in the past five years, for which Crenshaw's work was selected from hundreds of commendable applicants. I was absorbed in the narrative between seemingly disparate images where the colour palette unifies an energetic whirring of different textures. The paint is applied like sun cream; rubbed, splashed, smeared, misted - sprayed on and scraped off - a glorious celebration of motion and tactility that captured a vigour as opposed to a valley. And yet, there *is* something distinctly scene-like about these pictures...

I was fortunate enough to speak to the artist herself at the private view for the show. Outgoing and exuberant, Crenshaw is at once as forthright and receptive as her paintings. Produced over a ten day period in Naples in the summer of 2013, *Southern Stories* was initially inspired by the quirky, half-built constructions that are common in the south of Italy. Often a result of criminals who take advantage of building contracts to extort money, Crenshaw's rapid mark making conveys the pace at which these structures are approved, constructed and promptly abandoned. She describes commonplace scenes of "rocks piled on rocks, everything held together with rusty wire, and chaos reigning supreme", an idiom that is typical of her paintings themselves. The works operate at the interstice between representation and abstraction; observing this phenomenon and bringing it to our attention rather than commenting on it directly – as fleeting as the moment one passes it on a train.

The restricted colour palette of ochre, blue and grey is a self-imposed limitation that allows the mark making to take central focus, though in this series, the colours are an explicit reference to the limpid skies of the south and the excess of cement. Crenshaw recalls "when I made this particular body of work in August there was incredible light and blue skies every day. Those colours allude to that situation, and the view I had from my studio of rock walls, decrepit buildings, a road, a rusty sculpture in the middle of a park".

In a nod to Abstract Expressionism, Crenshaw applies paint with found objects in order to further remove herself from the mental image that is often over-worked though brushstrokes alone; "the more I relax, the more the paintings result in being less laboured. Letting go of control has been a key factor." Unfinished, no clear image, hazy; the white space around a focal point that makes a painting looks incomplete, impulsiveness is observed in the way that Crenshaw works. Though this isn't always the case – many paintings outside the *Southern Stories* series such as *Blue Sky New York* (2013) consume the paper in paint: "In elementary school my art teacher always commended my ability of filling the page. Old habits die hard." *Southern Stories* is bolder for its incompleteness. Each painting provides a snapshot, a suggestion of potential narrative as the viewer moves from one to the next, rather than the artist's recollection.

Though the works are loosely based on landscapes (the fluid black lines are reminiscent of Asian ink painting in the manner of Zao Wu-Ki whom Crenshaw credits as an influence) Crenshaw primarily uses this approach to direct the composition, assigning a recognisable top or bottom to each painting. This largely explains their orientation; the paintings are hung portrait rather than landscape to distance them from their original context. Crenshaw states that her works "are influenced by her immediate surroundings" but they do not refer directly to a certain scene or image. On a more fundamental level perhaps, and at a further counterpoint to the classicism of Asian ink painting,

Crenshaw firmly grounds her work in the present day by using drawing apps as an electronic journal of the things she sees on her studio commute. "I don't have a sophisticated app, just a basic drawing one. One day it dawned on me that could be a reason I am comfortable with this format." The orientation of paper then alludes to the phone screen, creating a tension between the manmade and the natural, the digital and the drawn.

The term *Modern Classic* is overused and yet in its most literal interpretation it feels appropriate to describe Crenshaw's work in this way. At once forward-thinking and multi-medial, there is a deeper understanding of her place in art's chronology that is evident in her use of form and colour. The paintings are honest, unsentimental – a collage of images that are a relevant interpretation of traditional landscape works in the present day. "Everywhere, what goes on in the landscape and how we interact is a reflection of the times. I find this mysterious side more interesting subject matter than romanticized versions."

*Mary Crenshaw is an American born artist and lives and works in Milan. Four of the works displayed in Thirst as well as another painting from the series are now part of Brunel University's permanent collection and are currently due to be installed in the flagship Eastern Gateway Building.*

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