

DOMOBAAL

Ron Haselden - In the Asking

by Tim Martin

Haselden has made three recent works, *September* at domobaal, *Metro* at Camden Arts Centre, London and *Phare* in a field in north west France. All three works use vertical metal poles to tightly hold aloft a drawing made of coloured fisherman's cord. Haselden has made much work since the 1960s. The freshness of the work has been maintained whether it is Anthony Caro, Richard Long or Richard Serra as a context. I would like to write a few lines about these remarkable works by starting a little further back in history.

Let me start by unfolding a thought about Piero della Francesca through Michel Foucault, the most congenial of the champions of French postmodernism along with Derrida and Lacan. Piero's work lies between the early Renaissance of Masaccio, and the high Renaissance of Leonardo da Vinci. Piero's book on perspective was far in advance of paintings by Masaccio or the first book by Alberti, and became the basis of Da Vinci's book on the subject, almost without alteration. But Piero wrote another, lesser known book called *De Quinque Corporibus Regularibus*, [On the Five Regular Bodies] (1480).

This book sets out to measure natural objects, but not in the three dimensional x,y,z grid Descartes used more than a century later. Piero used Plato's five regular bodies, shapes with identical faces, the pyramid, the cube, etc., the ones that most fit the object, and then measured from the surface of the body to the object. He would, for example, draw a tree placed inside a pyramid. As per Foucault, this was Piero's episteme, his way of submitting the things of the world to a form of knowing, of tabulating and representing points in space using regular bodies. I always thought that this episteme was evident in Piero's paintings too (fig.1), giving his Madonnas and his landscapes a platonic solid humour, unlike Michelangelo. Piero's figures are infused from within by an ideal Other, a *Spiritus Sanctus*, rather than Michelangelo's perfect forms which are deduced in the manner of a generality out of a specificity.

Piero's episteme was applied, it might be added, only in his studio to the paintings, and not to the architectural site of the paintings. Judging by some of the drawings, this episteme was applied for real in the studio. In a drawing a life model reclines with his head inside a dodecahedron. I know that the writing of this book took some considerable time and research, and caused complaints from his clients; paid commissions were not getting finished on time. Piero's work with the five regular bodies did not have to be done. It may have benefited from the munificence of the Duke of Urbino, but that would have been as nothing without Piero's asking, his ability to endure for decades a questioning that entails a negative state of being, a subject who does not know.

The greatness of men is neither guaranteed, nor is that greatness always obvious. Piero lived through a great historical crisis, the fall of the Roman Orthodox Empire at Constantinople. It was, in effect, the greatest shift in Western culture in over a thousand years. Piero's episteme worked because it addressed this crisis with a thoughtful and visible solution, it unified Catholic and Orthodox theology, it unified the abstract truth of a heaven of an Other with the tangible facts of an earth that belonged to man. I don't know whether he ever placed a real tree in a pyramid or placed a cubic grid on a landscape. If he did string out the landscape, he would have had no clear category in which to place this kind of enquiry, and it still lies somewhere between a science and a religion.

From Piero and his episteme let me now move to another story in the hope that it too catches something about Ron Haselden's work. When he was a child he submitted two drawings to a competition. His favourite was a scene of Spitfires landing on an aircraft carrier; the second was a recollection of a jolting bus-ride sunset after the rain, in which points of light glittered off wet surfaces. Haselden won the competition, but not, to his surprise, for his favourite painting. It was a lesson; he looked into the landscape and into the sun and a double recognition ensued. He was prized for a work that paid attention to

DOMOBAAL

what was around him, and not prized for his boy fantasy of a Spitfire-protected stronghold. He went to art school at a time when much work was in the vein of Moore and Hepworth, a realm of aesthetic objects, often closed forms cast or carved. Anthony Caro's work appealed much more: assembled, constructed rather than cast or carved, out on the floor instead of up on a plinth. In the 1960s the American Minimalists, Smithson, Land Art, and Conceptual Art came to his attention. This sounds like the trajectory of Richard Long, and for some good reasons. They were born within months of each other. For both artists there are ideas involved, the work is on the ground, and the interventions are minimal. Neither artist calls out the bulldozers. Haselden's context is the 1960s and 70s, another period of turmoil, of cold war, pop culture, an end to Modernism, and the deconstruction of sculpture into a differential term that included architecture and landscape. Here the sustained context is between Robert Smithson and Richard Long.

Long is a poet of the picturesque, in which man's most noble rational doings are as nothing against the vastness of time and mountains. Haselden does not need to backdrop his work with the spectacle of nature. Long conjures a prehistoric future in which all has been undone save a few surfaces of perfect flatness. There is a finality in some of Long's work, his rock constructions stay on the mountain. Haselden avoids such finality, like a circus his works are erected and then dismantled. He catches a moment before anything is built, still tentatively pegged out. No masons or diggers, just at that point when we are still asking, what and where, and pulling out string. This was part of the British picturesque too, when Capability Brown would make a cloth the size of a lake and move it around the landscape to decide where it should be. And Haselden, like Smithson, has a way of bringing what was outside to the inside of the gallery, from the periphery to the centre, without resorting to the contrivance of picturesque well-composed photo documentation.

Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (fig.2) was made in Utah, one of those places you can call in a bulldozer, because the site itself has been bulldozed by a far point on the horizon, an indestructible vanishing point. What Smithson made was determined by his fascination with the mind/matter problem, and his belief that the structural epistememes of the mind came from the structure of matter itself. Like Piero and his platonic solids, Smithson saw the crystal as the un-negatable structural truth of nature; the crystal was the lowest form of matter. The mind was made of matter, and the structural schemas it used to make sense of the world were the structures of matter itself. Similarly, to stare at the far horizon of the landscape brought one to the far horizon of the mind, its very limits. Consciousness was a folding in the universe, a mirror game between two vanishing points. With Smithson, as with Richard Serra, matter speaks, and when it does it utters menacing truths.

Let me return now to Ron Haselden's three new works starting with *Phare* (fig.3) made in a field in Plouër sur Rance, France, in August 2008. The field is of a certain size, agriculturally not quite best to survive, a little too small but enough if it had to be. This whole area of France was known for its harshness of poverty, of reflective men who thought to survive, who put food before politics if they could. The field has few signs of previous cultivation, no old fruit trees, no pottery shards; the Romans settled on a spot around the other side of the hill. There are plenty of medium-large hardwoods surrounding it, slightly shaped by the local granite acid soil and salt air. I have avoided finding it on any map in part to preserve the impression that it is on a peninsula, surrounded on three sides by the English Channel.

A sketch of *Phare* shows a yellow zigzag that has its own recession to infinity, its own perspectival system, set out in a landscape. *Phare* is a trompe l'oeil that can be walked in. It is a happy drawing, its legs wobble a bit, and don't hold tightly to the drawn path set out by the perspectival illusion of depth.

'Phare' plays a nice Franglais word game with 'far'. It is the naming of a distant point, as a point of light, as a setting of the compass to a distant point on the horizon. The

DOMOBAAL

Phare Ouest, the Far West. On approach the work is encountered from its larger end, the eye is almost caught in the plane of 'light' just above head-height, emitted from the far end of the field. As we walk into this beam, the field rises slightly so that the eye is actually caught, snagged if one does not stoop. This comes as a walking surprise to those who enter it; the sculpture reveals the amount of rise and fall on the surface of the field. Further along still the field drops again and we approach the point of eminence, now too narrow to enter. We walk to the origin but cannot enter it bodily, only visually. This work is on the side of Smithson, of referencing a big Other that resides in an unapproachable vanishing point. It is the landscape painting he did as a child, that point of light on the horizon that flicks across the material world. But it is also on the side of the astonishment of facts, the facticity of the world, the rise and fall of a field, a break in the forest, or the position of a door in a room. Just as the Other seems most to approach in all its potential bang and rip, it is the facts of the world that the body finally encounters, even smacks into. I am, for a brief intense moment, a stumbler who asks.

Our thoughts and feelings about this Other are staked out in the mind with a certain tentativeness. The lines and connections made are not cast in concrete, this kind of lumpy permanence of the object is not the point. It's about the subject who wonders, who asks, the subject that is capable for a moment of encountering the body simultaneously in its relation to the Other and to the astounding facticity of the world.

Metro was erected earlier in another field. It, like *September*, is a somewhat different kind of work from *Phare*. *Metro* is based on a tile pattern common to the interior surfaces of the Paris Metro. A white tile, raised in the middle is laid in a repeated overlap typical of the bonding pattern of brickwork. In Paris this solution is repeated countless times, viewed by countless eyes. Someone, a less big other, thought of this solution. It could have been different, it could have been a grid, or a flat tile. A decision was made, a type of knowledge levied, a way of making sense was formulated and lived out, laid out across the many square miles of surface of an subterranean density of lived experience, an interior consciousness through which we travel. We make our way in the world through the episteme; it gives the world a surface through which we bodies can pass. With *Metro* short stationary moments allow us to see the episteme that makes bodily life in the world possible, but when we are not in the room, not in the gallery as a station in the temporal flow of our lives, we are crossed with long periods of motion when the episteme blurs into action, and in so doing becomes invisible. Haselden draws the train of lived experience to a little halt, and we know only that we could get off here, but only to get back on again before the train departs.

"In the absence of hard factual evidence, if any exists at all, artists create their own approaches to looking at objects and their spaces. Objects in spaces, and the influence of the surrounding day to day landscape/cityscape/roomscape/weatherscape/ soundscape/etc. etc." - Ron Haselden

September is a similar work. It exists during the month for which it is named. It takes as its starting off point the pattern found on an orange wrapper. A rectilinear pattern adorns an exterior surface, it traps aroma, it brings an idea to a natural object. In the gallery the idea hits the eye at eye level. Bang, there it is, not quite random, or if it is, it certainly is a fact that lies in our path through the room. The pattern is ingested by the eye, and suddenly it is inside, organising ideas and sensations. *Metro* and *September* are epistemes as objects, a response to a context, a placing of a found and incorporated episteme in relation to the world so that the body has a place to appear and exist.

The trope of Foucault's episteme has its limits when speaking of Haselden's works, partly because of their temporal aspects. There is an urgency to *Phare* and *Metro* and *September*. How long does an episteme work to show us the world before the world begins to show something else, something more by it? Piero's episteme did not survive. To the

DOMOBAAL

degree that it was ever accepted, it was replaced by a Cartesian algebra or a bravura sfumato, epistemes that owed more to mathematics and optics than a heavenly prescribed ideality. The strings of *Metro* slacken under a dozen starlings' weight, never to quite tighten again. They leave the work as we do, not with a greater power from a period of rest, but a greater vitality from a duration of intense experience. Only the birds, however, have seen the drawing from its vantage point in the sky.

What Haselden has made is a contingent way of knowing as an object, but what it conjures is the subject who asks in the first place. It's this subject that fills the room, locates itself in space, rises and drops. It is this happy coming together of a way of asking and a way of knowing that give his work its greatness as art, and the sustained suspension of the consistency of the self that this requires. Haselden's work quietly and persistently transforms the facts of the world and the facts of the strings of thought into a monument to the bodily subject who asks. He gives the subject a place to accept inconsistency, temporality, and contingency with excitement, as in a pleasure, the pleasure of filling a place well. Like Richard Serra's work (fig.4), Haselden's work provides an intensity of bodily spatial extension, a pure gut experience, but while avoiding *une menace*. On reflection later, the works leave a memory; one that has been already generously fingered into life from a point in the sky, or a point on the horizon, a point from which the body was stretched to a truth beyond any episteme, if even for the duration of a breath.

Tim Martin, London, September 2008

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