

And In Berlin

Barbara Nicholls

Private view

Thursday 23rd September 2010 6.00-9.00pm

Exhibition open

24th September – 17th October

Thursday – Sunday 12.00pm-6.00pm

Central Space

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Introduction

Barbara Nicholls' current body of work is the outcome of her three month stay in Berlin in 2009. While earlier work dealt more directly with the theme of war, the current exhibition springs from her observation of the after effects of war on the city of Berlin, and the layering of time and history.

It seems that Nicholls recognised many of her own conundrums and concerns in Berlin, where fragments of the Wall and other signs of its regimented, controlling past are visible alongside the more chaotic present – organic processes of decay and impromptu social acts of reclaiming. A piece of the Wall covered by chewing gum or a rock covered by graffiti became the starting point for exploratory water colours which were then worked up into the wood and gesso pieces which make up the bulk of the exhibition.

The ambiguous relationship between surface and depth is a theme that has run through this artist's work over the last decade. Surfaces are plugged, lines are gouged, cross sections are sawn and then re-filled in a continuous process of revealing and concealing. Barriers are erected and breached. Frames cannot contain their contents. A dotted matrix on a wall cannot define the snaking structure placed upon it. A flower-like structure erupts from the end of an orderly arrangement of rectangles. Systems are evoked, then subverted, grids are laid down then encroached upon, lettering is made partially legible.

If previous work exploited a tension similar to the work of Eva Hesse between geometric and organic forms, and between two and three dimensions, the work that has developed from the artist's Berlin experience has evolved in a different direction. The current work is more pictorial. The frame has mostly disappeared as a device. The four sides of the support are no longer a boundary to be crossed, but a container for the imaginative work inside it.

Each piece has been constructed by routing, digging down into layers of colour which, like geological strata, have already been laid down. These 'discovered' forms and colours are then integrated with what is laid directly on the surface. The resulting images suggest aerial views of land masses, cities and conurbations, heavenly bodies, or floating, organic forms that might be discovered under a microscope.

Maps have great imaginative potential and range. Artists from Alighiero Boetti to Kathy Prendergast have exploited the ability of maps to stand for deadpan factual detail, for geopolitical entities, or for forays into the unknown. Barbara Nicholls' blunt practice of stratifying, digging and gouging has created delicate and complex fictional territories that draw upon the language of maps without being maps. This work edges us toward another of the map's powers – to stand as a metaphor for the

reflective act itself.

Karen Raney

Barbara Nicholls in conversation with **Karen Raney**

11 May & 6 July 2010

KR Your current body of work came from a three month residency in Berlin. You said that cycling around Berlin was almost a form of drawing, where you were led to cul-de-sacs, dead ends, places where you got lost.

BN Cycling was also a research tool to allow the subject matter to reveal itself.

My approach was akin to the archaeologist who searches beneath the surface to unearth clues to construct historical narratives. It was my first time in Berlin. I wanted to explore the City as a 'site': political, historic, archaeological, architectural, fictitious. I was mindful of my earlier doctoral research into war and remembrance, and subsequent work to do with borders, codes and crossings.

Some routes brought me through zones that were a combination of the Cold War and more recent planning. I was particularly fascinated by areas that had once been divided by the Wall, that I saw as potential to be metaphors for larger themes: a section of the Wall covered in chewing gum, rubble on the streets reminding me of meteorites in the Natural History Museum, or the way the Berlin pavements were made using giant granite slabs and small granite blocks. I was interested in something being extracted from one part of the landscape and fitted into another.

KR It seems to me in the current body of work you are bringing together material strategies you have explored in the past, but you have made something much more pictorial. You're using the strategies of digging, filling in, layering to make what could be described as an image. In some works there's a sense of an aerial view of land and sea, and in others there's a sense of the cosmos.

BN The pictorial element surprised me too. I have started to see this current work more as painting, in the sense that you can enter into an illusionistic space. They're still very much to do with surface, but I'm playing with looking into as well as at. I'm allowing the work to return within the language of painting.

KR The notion of mapping and the physical reality of the map has been strong in your past work and continues in this body of work.

BN The map of Berlin was an early device for a ground and structure which developed into more complex networks. I selected some of the elements I had observed in my initial watercolour studies.

KR Then you worked from these watercolours developing the laminated wood pieces for this new series.

BN In the watercolours I experimented with combining different elements. For instance, I inserted a partial text into drawings of rubble, as if they were striations or an incomprehensible language in rock. I was fascinated the way that Berlin had been divided, staked out and represented in the maps of the Cold War. I took the image of the centre of Berlin and surrounded it with rubble I constructed out of text.

KR The images suggest the information of mapping. The colours appear to be codes. You evoke the appearance of a map or what a map might offer, evoking the idea of a system without actually giving us one.

BN I'm not a geologist but I'm fascinated by geological maps. The colour coding of the strata, all the information contained in them. I guess what I'm doing is making fictional sites, imagined sites.

KR In a similar way you use letters to evoke the idea of language, without actually writing anything legible.

BN In Berlin I came upon this rock, a big standing stone on the edge of the park where the Wall had been. It was overlaid with graffiti. It took me back to the first time I heard Schwitters' Dada poetry. I was trying to decipher German culture, its history and language. I came across this jumbled text on a piece of rock. It seemed to contain all the elements I'd been working with.

KR Again, the tension between legibility and illegibility.

BN I wanted to find ways of capturing the brutal nature and spontaneity of the un-crafted approach to the calligraphy of graffiti. In some of the watercolours, I inserted text. I didn't want the letters to be flat, so I curled and distorted them. The silhouettes of these forms overlapped to make indecipherable structures. Sometimes one can decipher those letters, particularly the smaller ones, but the larger are part of the form, like camouflage. The juxtaposition of the letters was not specific in terms of language allowing new meanings to emerge. The meaning became lost and found in the form. Within that structure there are also what I describe as "plotted thumbprints", corresponding to a part of the Wall I saw that was covered in chewing gum. These individual throwaway gestures – mini protests – became plot marks within the composition.

KR Tell me about your process of excavating, gouging out, then filling in.

BN This is a process that I've been exploring for quite a while, routing into plywood. Each layer of becomes a layer of history or geological strata and by setting the router gauge to a certain depth, I could play with the depth of history like time zones. I could go to the first layer of the wood or continue all the way through to the base. I would make other fragments to insert, jam, lodge into these new forms that I'd created. A new ground, a new territory, like parts of Berlin; they fit but they don't quite follow on.

KR I thought those insertions in the wood in the earlier work were to suggest the end of something much longer and deeper, like looking at a cross section of the end of the wall.

BN Cross sections offer interesting insights and revelations. It's plugging and blocking in the gaps created in the routed surface. Are these plugs inserted to conceal something? I'm revealing but concealing at the same time.

KR That idea of revealing and concealing runs through a lot of your work.

BN Yes and in the current work I've laid down layers of coloured gesso in order to dig back down to them with the router. I don't know what I'm going to find. The idea of lost and found is coming through the work, order and chance. When I used the sander, it was like taking a crocodile for a walk. You get this slow momentum, then this sudden digging down.

KR The way you use colour is a continuity with your earlier work. Colour in your work is never descriptive or topological, never an attribute of objects. It's a layer of meaning that sometimes weaves itself around the forms, or fades in and out, or works as a simulated code.

BN I became interested in creating territories of colour which corresponded to different areas of the landscape. This developed out of earlier work from trench map lines (2002) and replacing the trench with different colour uniforms. It was as if the colour

became territory. I combined established symbolic colour codes with a more subversive palette which have inherent contradictions. I'm experimenting with codes of information; I allude to the way maps are read. I'm interested in the language of colour coding whilst at the same time setting up new systems.

KR It's as if you are evoking logical systems of mapping without actually scientifically mapping anything. You often set up rectilinear systems then challenge them with chaos and something amorphous and unplottable. Images evoke precision and legibility and are then subverted.

BN In maths at school we would plot correlations, points of reference on a grid. The beauty of the maths was drawing that connecting line, creating that beautiful line on the graph. You always had a 'point of origin.' It used to mystify me what that point of origin was. What is the point of origin? Working on those wood pieces, I would think - where is the point of origin? Where does this image begin? Is it the surface, is it the ground? Do I dig down, how far do I dig down, where do I stop digging through time and history?

KR I know war and remembrance has been a subject of yours in the past, and the current exhibition is entitled 'And in Berlin.' Are you using Berlin as a springboard? As a metaphor for the process of uncovering history?

BN I've used Berlin as a springboard, yes, it is an important metaphor in my work. My experiences of Berlin are infused in the work without being literal. I wanted the rawness of my sense of history to come through and the brute force combined with a more poetic sense, the questioning of territory. Because of my earlier Doctoral research at the Imperial War Museum London, it was important for me to visit this iconic site and understand events from a different perspective. From a conversation with a philosopher born in the East of the City I saw the Wall as a form of protection, a form of defence and the Wall as a Front line. It's what Berlin triggers in my imagination, how it is situated in Europe and the World, all the different facets of it that I was confronted with. It embraces politics, sociology, anthropology, geology.

KR The Berlin Wall stood for rigid systems of control. The control failed. The wall came down and something else happened in that zone. There are vibrant communities, dead ends, chewing gum and graffiti; there's a chaotic, organic process in action. Maybe that's why Berlin was very evocative for you. It represents a dynamic already in your work between system and anti-system, plotting and unplottability, or as we were saying between the readable and the unreadable. It's not accidental that Berlin has fed your imagination.

BN I think it was the right place to go at that time in the development of my work. There are equivalents for the way I work that were contained in Berlin. I am interested in working with the debris that's created out of my own process. The early structure of the wall was makeshift, there's still debris around. I was fascinated to see photographs of the early wall, where the façade of a house was used to build one face of the wall and then it continued on as a structure. Something about the putting of disparate parts together in a makeshift way called to mind my own process of collaging and assembling forms together. That's where the imagination comes in. Since coming back I've been working to gather all these influences into the present and imaginatively reconstruct and transform them.

Karen Raney is a writer, Senior Lecturer in art theory at the University of East London, and the editor of engage journal.

Barbara Nicholls – Born in Cheshire and lives in London Nicholls graduated from Goldsmiths College in 1986, The University of East London with a Masters in Fine Art in 1998, and a Doctorate in Fine Art in 2006.

She has exhibited Nationally and Internationally. Recent shows include: Borderlines Artoll Nordrhein-Westfalen Germany 2010, Emerge AVA University of East London, Milchhof Berlin Germany 2009, Borders, Codes and Crossings APT Gallery London 2008, The Trench Imperial War Museum London, London in Six Easy Steps ICA, Characters in Fire The Gate and Electric Cinema, British Council residency and touring exhibition Brazil, What Passing Bells Stockport War Memorial and Art Gallery, City Movements Lyric Square Hammersmith London. The work is also in private and corporate collections in the UK, France,

Germany and USA.

Nicholls has taught on Fine Art Pogrammes at Reading University, Brighton University, Brunel University, Sheffield Hallam University, Manchester Metropolitan University, The University of East London, Surrey Institute and Croydon Higher Education College.

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