

WORLD SCULPTURE NEWS

VOLUME 21 NUMBER 3 SUMMER 2015



KIRSTEEN PIETERSE

Pleasures Of



Above from left: Kirsteen Pieterse, **Immortals Place 1**, 2015, aluminum, 37 x 43 x 12 cm. Kirsteen Pieterse, **Immortals Place 2**, 2015, aluminum, 37 x 77 x 13 cm. Kirsteen Pieterse, **Gentle Mountain and Cloud**, 2015, lacquered steel, stainless steel, paint, 62 x 97 x 20 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

The Scottish-born Hong Kong-resident Kirsteen Pieterse makes sculptures that are deeply felt contemplative expressions of the ephemeral qualities of the world. Whether she is realizing a cloud formation or a precarious structure, there is an uncanny tautness at play. Her art is as far from the remorseless presence of metropolitan commerce and conflict as one can get, which is one of its subtle pleasures.

By Ian Findlay

The Ephemeral



There is an emotional sense of discovery of the world around us through sculpture that is not found with painting. Like dance, in all its forms, the three-dimensional reality of sculpture speaks to our humanity and physical presence. In the best sculpture, from the figurative to the abstract, there is sincerity in the artist's vision and a lack of pretension, which are among its greatest strengths: we are always drawn to these. And also in exceptional sculptures, large and small, there is a real demand to be touched, to complete the artist's work with a small physical gesture of the hand.

When I touch a sculpture, I often have a curious sense of meeting an old friend from the distant past whose pres-

ence now serves to reinforce the passion of our lives. And so it is with the art of Kirsteen Pieterse. When first encountered, her art, which has many formal qualities to it—from careful architectural geometry to the seemingly easy abstraction of natural forms—demands attention. Each material she uses, from stainless steel to reclaimed wood, from acrylic rods to balsawood, also lends a distinctive quality to her aesthetic. There is an effortless quality to the lines and forms of her completed work. There is also an uncanny balance to her work that is inviting: one often feels that something about a piece is going to change before one's eyes, which might be a disaster or a subliminal flight of fantasy that arrives like a gossamer memory from a deep unconscious time.

"I don't mean to be formal," says Pieterse, "I don't intend formalism. I am quite conservative and practical: by this I mean in the placement of my work. How am I going to place a piece on the floor or a wall, and so on. I would say that I am formal in the ways of Agnes Martin, Anthony Caro, and Philip King. If you say there is an effortless tension, it might mean that it is well made; and one knows how difficult that is."

It is demanding to make art with a unique personal touch that marks it out from the work of myriad other artists. In Pieterse's case, beyond the architectural and drawing concerns, that individual touch is informed by numerous feminine qualities, which are discerned in her softer cloud forms and her balsawood

works, which hint at classical Asian landscape art and the best of Western oil and watercolor landscape painting. One sees these qualities in the detailing of the aluminum works entitled *Immortals Place 1* (2015), *Immortals Place 2* (2015), *Gentle Mountain and Cloud* (2015) as well.

These works are clear and direct. They speak to her environmental concerns as well as to her love of steel as she “loves the challenge of working with it. The heaviness of it, the ‘masculinity’ associated with working with it, all appealed to me as my work had a delicate and ephemeral bottom line to it. Working with stainless steel brought me to mild steel at the time I was focusing on clouds as my subject matter and I found I could ‘draw’ clouds into the steel using my grinder. Aluminum came about recently as I wanted to make cloud pieces for the wall and steel was too heavy and unmanageable for me working alone in my studio.”

Whether she uses aluminum or stainless steel or simply drawing clouds or rock formations, she says that she is simply trying to achieve an emotional response to the work that is essentially romantic, airy, and leads to viewers thinking about landscape in an abstracted way. But she is also “trying to make work that feels a certain way. Like a Chinese painting, I juxtapose positive and negative space. I quite like your feminine reading of the work. But the reading of the material and the associations people bring to a material are important to me. With steel, for example, you think of engineering, as for a man. I like that association because I am trying to change the image and to take steel to make something light of it, something that is delicately balanced.”

“I like life drawing, which gave me the discipline of how to translate what one sees, almost as in an exercise and a sense of gravity and perspective and the physicality of person. Through this I also know when I coming to the end of something, which is a comfortable time; the tension of making a work is going out of your mind and body. I feel quite high with finishing a piece. But as I leave my studio and go home, I am thinking about what I am going to

do next. I have no plans to make a start on something. I pick up bits and pieces and work with them until an idea forms and I can begin to make something new. You know, many small pieces have come from jet lag or just watching people on the street or listening to a pod cast.”

While Pieterse was born in 1971 in Catrine, Ayrshire, Scotland, and studied sculpture at Glasgow School of Art and architecture at the University of East London, her influences and inspirations are wide ranging, including trekking in Tasmania’s Tarkine Forest (“a life-changing trek for me”) to looking at an ever-changing landscape or simply the rain.



Kirsteen Pieterse, Fossil, 2008, stainless steel, 320 x 90 x 90 cm. Hoppers Crossing, Wyndham, Victoria, Australia.

“But when I discovered Anthony Caro at art school in Glasgow and his architectural sculptures, it opened my eyes to architecture as sculpture.”

Each of these highlights her sculpture’s deep connection with the environment, both the ephemeral and the solidly natural which evokes the feeling of the poetic and the monumental as well as the powerful and fragile presence of architecture that can quickly crumble, sabotaged by whim, either manmade or natural. These are suggested in the simple and elegant *Gentle Mountain and Cloud* in which the lovely crafted structure seems about to collapse, monumental ar-

chitecture as something fragile. Looking at this work one cannot help but be reminded of the destruction of New York’s Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. The monumental symbol of Western capitalism, seemingly indestructible, laid low by technology and apoplectic religious rage.

The blend of these qualities in her art is one of its most engaging qualities. One sees the environmental connection in elegant works such as *Cloudcatcher 2* (2011), *Stratus Nimbus 5* (2012), and *Coast* (2013). In these works one senses the wind wafting the forms away, into the unknown. But, at the same time, there is an ethereal poetic quality to the structures as they float in space: a powerful gust of wind will make them vanish, memories only to the eye’s imagination. The cloud forms *Immortals Place 1* and *Immortals Place 2* are similarly fated. Pieterse seems to be saying, “see, nature is so transient.”

The environment and nature, crucially at the heart of her sculptures, are frequently drawn from painting and act as metaphors of change: sometimes gentle, sometimes brutal. It seems to me that her clouds, as in *Immortals Place 1* and *Immortals Place 2*, reference the art of John Constable, where the aluminum ‘drawings’ are clouds that have a sense of flight; and together with *Gentle Mountain and Cloud* they speak to Chinese landscape art. Many of her works also allude to collapsed buildings, shipwrecks, and even the art of the Russian constructivist artist Vladimir Tatlin, and the dramatic landscapes by Casper David Friedrich, where jagged ridges of distant mountains reach for the clouds.

“Your Constable reference is good to hear and fantastic that it has shown through. Cloud studies have been very important to my recent work. I read somewhere that his cloud studies are made up of a series of verticals, horizontals, and diagonals, like the way I build and I wondered if I could take that as a starting point and make sculpture feel like it’s hardly there, try to make it deny its undeniable existence as an object. Living in Hong Kong means low cloud and rain are a feature of regular life and it never ceases to excite me to see the tops of buildings shrouded by cloud, or cloud coming down the mountainsides.”

She notes that many of her early works “were very consciously made from architectural model-making materials like foam core and balsawood as it was important for me to have the works placed as ‘models,’ to be associated with the ‘in-between’ state of a structure yet to be built or a model of something already existing. I gave them landscape formation type titles, like *Ravine* and *Chasm*. But my first ruined tree was made from balsawood. I decided to use balsawood for the association of model making and timber as well as the delicacy of it. I trod on a log during the trek and it crumbled beneath my feet; it was hollow and barely there yet looked solid. That was a sickening feeling to destroy something like that, just because I wanted to do a trek to see such an amazing place. The acrylic I started to use because of its shininess, more durability, and how it throws light around and off the sculptures. It gave them a ‘shifting’ quality that fitted with my ideas and aesthetic. But the stainless steel work only happened in 2007.”

Casper David Friedrich is important inspiration for her as she says that

on looking at his work: “it’s as if you are seeing through your eyelashes, a bit distant, a bit half remembered. The leaden skies remind me of Scotland and that pure light you get there. And his subject, the scary, immense landscape, is full of danger and beautiful sadness.” Such an influence came, she says, “from looking at rain as my subject in my final year at art school and looking at a way to celebrate it, venerate it, and this led me to looking at Casper David Friedrich and his landscapes with ruined cathedrals, solitary broken trees, shipwrecks, and so on. It was the use of the vertical in Gothic architecture (to draw the eyes upwards and consider a larger power) that led me to reading further on the poetics of architecture. I was making installations with my sculpture pieces and I wanted to study architecture to make the sculpture better, more informed. It has always been about making sculpture though, that’s the priority.” Pieterse’s architectural works on the edge of disaster suggest the end of life where there is a dramatic and stark beauty. As she says, “That’s what I’m aiming for: to do with ‘stuff’ that Casper David Friedrich did with paint.”

Pieterse’s mentors are few, but the ones that quickly come to her mind are her Auchinleck Academy art teacher, the late “Willie Strachan, and one of my tutors at Glasgow Art School Christine Borland, who taught me that my practice could be expansive and she gave me confidence to see being an artist was beyond the safety of the institution, and to be proud of what I make,” which includes “my ruined trees, starting from the balsawood piece *Methuselab*, to the stainless steel *Heartwood*, *Impending*, *Resolve*, *Fossil*, and *Subsist* and my reclaimed cedar piece *Relict*.” At the same time, she notes that she has used balsawood as, “I like the low-tech experience of it. It is for making models. The association is of one’s everyday experience and the school craft experience of it.”

One might sense something of craft work in her most recent series of small sculptures, table-top works, tiny landscapes with carefully realized architectural “trunks” upon which rests a cloud, each seemingly about to move at any time. These works were inspired by Chinese Scholar Stones and among them works such *Dark Rain*, *Majestic Decent*,



Above left: Kirsteen Pieterse, *Recede*, 2009, clear acrylic rod, 127 x 64 x 51 cm. **Above right:** Kirsteen Pieterse, *Cloudcatcher 2*, 2011, mirror stainless steel with clear acrylic rod, 93 x 78 x 30 cm.

Summit, *Soft Clouds Stone*, and *Jagged Peaks in Spring Mist* (all 2015) are especially lovely. Each one is reminiscent of a tiny Chinese landscape painting. Even here one senses the potential monumental aspect of Pieterse's art and her imagination. These works strike me as very personal, private statements visualized in three dimensions. She wishes these to speak for themselves.

"I was attracted to the function of scholar stones, that the *literati* would take these small rocks, which reminded them of huge landscape formations, and bring them from the mountains and into their studios in order for them to be able to contemplate and meditate on the concept of immense landscapes. Small table top objects that allowed their minds to wander," says Pieterse. "My versions are fusions of cloud, mountains, and stones but I am placing them in a contemporary conversation. They are consciously flat and faceted to suggest contemporary speed of construction, machined, prefabricated building units. And they also suggest architecture with their angles. My bases are made from stainless steel engineered units to call to mind the engineering ripping into and through these ancient mountains, displacing landscape."

The ephemeral quality of Pieterse's work collectively is dictated by natural rhythms and environmental conditions. The work is still about "the weather and its impact," she says. "I would watch



Kirsteen Pieterse, installation view of a recent studio exhibition (from left: **Majestic Descent**, 2015, stainless steel, 16 x 23 x 10 cm; **Meandering Gentle Mountain**, 2015, stainless steel, 12 x 17 x 7 cm; **Dark Rain**, 2015, stainless steel, 21 x 18 x 10 cm; **Summit**, 2015, stainless steel, 20 x 9 x 8 cm; **Resilient Rock**, 2015, stainless steel, 15.5 x 17 x 11 cm; **Soft Clouds Stone**, 2015, stainless steel, 16.5 x 13 x 9 cm; and **Jagged Peaks in Spring Mist**, 2015, stainless steel, 19 x 17 x 7 cm.)

the weather and try to gauge when, as a child, I could get outside to play. The weather was a big factor. Seems trivial, but it is still important. You can see this in my cloud wall sculptures, a Hong Kong development. These works sit between sculpture and drawing: my art practice consists of both and they are often one and the same. I often see my sculptures as drawings and the decisions involved are often drawing decisions, 'a few more lines needed here, how can I make that line disappear as if I've half rubbed it out,' that kind of thing. The cloud focus has led to more wall work, I don't know why. I don't plan a lot of my work. I don't know at the start what will happen, I just start making. I let what's in front of me take me to an understanding of what I'm trying to do, which is normally reached about halfway through the work. The

piece just becomes what it is through the making. I don't plan and then execute unless I really have to."

Kirsteen Pieterse's aesthetic and *oeuvre* are a perceptive metaphor for our uncertain times: it is, to my mind, art of the highest order, with a simple purity at its core. At the same time, there is also a serendipitous element to Pieterse's art making, which is wholly appropriate. Through this we are led emotionally and physically into discovering the intent and meaning of each work. This is part of the power of sculpture more than painting: it makes us deeply aware of our humanity through its presence and not through that of another human being. This is magical. There is no pretense. We complete the works and the artist's imagination. We touch the sculpture and in turn we are touched. Δ



Kirsteen Pieterse, **Resilient Rock**, 2015, stainless steel, 15.5 x 17 x 11 cm.



Kirsteen Pieterse, **Dark Rain**, 2015, stainless steel, 21 x 18 x 10 cm.