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Sean Slemon Solidifies Light and Space

By Jack McInnes

Young South African sculptor Sean Slemon completed a Fine Arts degree at the Michaelis School of Art, UCT a few years ago and is currently in New York where he is completing a Masters Degree at the Pratt Institute. Whilst on a short mid-year visit in June, he took time out to present the exhibition Solid Light at David Krut Arts Resource, in which he continues his artistic interrogation of the politics of space.

Slemon has been preoccupied with space for some time now. In 2005 he reproduced the internal footprint of the Premises Gallery at the Civic Theatre in Braamfontein using gradually reducing layers of carpet that rose up to form a two-and-a-half-ton mountain. In this work entitled Uplift: The Mountain Premises he sought to render the gallery space as solid material. By entirely occupying a space with an artwork, an act that must have caused a certain degree of inaccessibility and inconvenience, Slemon sought to probe the manner in which we attempt to control the personal and public spaces that we occupy. Space is, of course, a highly charged subject in our country's history and even while it remains an abstract concept, it is imbued with inordinate power: who gets to occupy a specific space, and what kinds of economic or socio-political transactions go down in order to make this possible.

Although the show Solid Light follows conceptually on from this previous work, the construction of the sculptural installation entitled Impossible Light Map Two marks a distinct departure from Slemon's previous fondness for using substantial sculptural form to represent space. In this work the space occupied by light beams streaming through window panes is demarcated with bitumen-stained string. Light, defined as "the natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible" is made tangible, it is solidified. It occurred to me while looking at this work that fishing line may have been a material more suited to the task of delineating light, but perhaps it would have been too subtle. There is something about the bulky stained string that Slemon has elected to use that speaks of the clumsy and arrogant way in which we appropriate space.

This sense of the appropriation of space is carried over into the etchings on show. In works entitled Solid Light and Gallery at 15:45, Monday 19th June Slemon depicts light beams as solid black lines, and inks in the areas of the image that depict light. Both strategies have the effect of substantializing the ethereal. Solid Windows attempts the same transformation but fails, in my opinion, due to the use of ruler-drawn lines which have the unfortunate effect of flattening three-dimensional space and therefore making any allusion to spatial materiality unconvincing.

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

The conceptual underpinning of Solid Light pivots on the materialization of the immaterial, and yet the wobbliness of the string in the sculptural installation and the waviness of the hand-drawn line in the etchings introduces a tentativeness and vulnerability into the work that hints at the shimmering elusiveness of light and space, and the ultimate impossibility of materializing it. Perhaps this is the crux of the matter: space, defined as the absence of solid form, is nothingness, and surely then, of no consequence, and yet in Slemon's attempt to solidify this nothingness we are reminded both of the societal and political impact of space, and at the same time of the futility of trying to dominate it.