

Space is Substance, an interview with painter Boo Saville

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Your upcoming show at TJ Boulting is titled Ma can you tell me more about Ma

I stumbled across the term on one of my research days, I am very interested in the Japanese movement mono ha (School of Things) and the history of ink work. Ma refers to a silence, its meaning relates to what we may see as negative space, silence as a compositional element. I've always been fascinated by the charged nature of this space, the space between words or the space between beats in music. It being full of possibility, or something not yet come into being but equally as important as the parts which are being described. It's a metaphorical function I guess and one which I familiarise.

Its second meaning, much more connected to me personally is that of Ma being 'mother'. I have a strange and melancholic relationship to the role of mother. In my life, losing my own mother in my thirties but also after years of fertility treatment not being able to fulfil my own role as a mother to a child. This left me feeling rather rootless, grieving and existing in a nether world not bracketed by this feminine lineage. In the hours after I lost my mum, an emotional severing of some invisible cord that connected me to her hit me. I have been feeling that rip again, slowly as I start to understand my childlessness. A situation I can only describe as being like a house with no roof and no floor.

However, to be more reflective and positive for a moment, I started to ask myself various questions: What are the possibilities that could happen in this space? Why do I as a woman feel a need to be defined by these roles? Is gender important or relevant in the idea of mothering? As a childless woman, what possibilities could be there that I would not otherwise be presented with? How can I use my work to heal these wounds? So essentially these ideas, although originating from a place of grief have been transformative and give to the world, their birth comes with huge optimism for what lies ahead.

It could be compared to society's silence in relation to a woman's childlessness too - what to say how to react. How the subject is awkwardly avoided, as there's a lot of silent pain there that's not discussed similar to how people used to talk / not talk about cancer in the past, we all need to learn how to navigate this sensitive but not uncommon ground, to learn the language.

There is silent pain, but there is also a huge freedom in not having that choice. There is

grief, but grief is a very transformative process in my experience. The image of the pregnant female body is iconic in culture. The Madonna, Venus, Demi Moore, Beyoncé. Something if you haven't crossed that rite of passage, the older childless woman in society feels like a pretty invisible one. Social validation to a certain extent comes with becoming a mother.

Your work is tackling big issues, where some artists maybe more explicit and literal in their approach to such autobiographical experiences yours is quietly understated, how do you go about planning a show like this - what's your process ?

I like to approach my work very practically especially when I'm handling large emotional experiences I've had. It's just the way I work and it helps me figure those things out. All artists I've met research obsessively. I love studying and dissecting something, or coming at something from left field. I'm a big believer in listening to your instinct, so I tend to just follow that and eventually it all makes sense. Making art is so exciting but also frustrating because starting any work is like a puzzle that you don't know what the rules are until you make them. Then the rules change again or you decide to break them.

I'm not so sure that I'm being that understated, I mean how understated is a 2 metre pink painting? But I see your point. I think there is real power in being understated, or in leaving things out. Space is substance, I'm just using it in my work to model my experience. Planning a show is a long process of failure and small successes, you often make one thing and then use that to bounce on to the next thing. This show started with the large colour work then I decided to make drawings.

'Space is substance', that's a great way to put it, and I think it beautifully sums up both the figurative and abstract aspects of your work, although I think there's an argument that all your work is figurative. In understated I mean more Agnes Martin than say Louise Bourgeois. The large abstract works bring to mind the Kantian notion of the sublime, it's impossible not to 'feel' something of the limitlessness when standing in front of these vast swathes of colour - they 'arouse enjoyment but with horror' of the abyss perhaps. Can you explain how you go about making these works, as they appear so effortless but I imagine the reality is somewhat to the contrary.

Well to say they are effortless is a huge compliment, thank you. I'm also a huge fan of Agnes Martin. My process is different with each one but I usually start by deciding what I need to get out of them or how I feel on the day. I usually start with an intention, a feeling that I'd like to communicate with the group or a particular one. This often changes as I progress through the layers. I often think about how feelings are so subtle, moving like a little river through your brain, the occasional ripple or wave.

Each layer helps me decide where the changes are going to happen, how many shifts in

colour, what are their relationships until it makes sense. It's a very slow process as you can imagine, mainly waiting and looking until something happens in my brain. I try to work and not think too much about it, just do what I intended then clean up and go home.

I decided with these ones not to paint when I was in a bad mood or feeling anxious or tired. But yes you're right that abyss can be rather terrifying. But within that abyss I see endless possibility and mystery.

These paintings were made and developed through connection. Connection with myself, my past and my future but also connection with women in particular. They are about friendship. They are titled after the girl children I may have had but also after important women in my life. I hope that people feel happy when they see them, the way I do every day at the studio.

And the figurative pieces for this show appear to have a different approach in technique, medium and intention ...

I knew quite early on that I wanted to show the abstract works alone for the first time without the black and white works. In the gallery (T J Boulting) there's this great little second room that I wanted to do something in. The drawings started with the egg, I've been doing nests for the past few years and the egg felt like a nice progression from that.

They are these little ideas about fertility, using traditional symbols around that idea that I find using a search engine. The copyright free image web site I use is so great, it's a dictionary of images probably used for advertising. It's completely cold just pure reference without any attachments. I use it so I can start at zero, this is important because it's pure at this point. I used to do the same with reference books, work my way through copying images. I often feel like a scientist, the image being the petri dish and the rendering is when I start growing some culture inside. The root pulled out the ground felt like an iceberg, all that stuff going on below but exposed. Like feelings I guess, the above and below of it all. Working with the inks is really challenging as I've never worked like that before but rather than drawing they are made with a tiny brush. I like to really study something and I also like to give myself a new challenge. The negative space of the paper surrounding the drawing is as much part of the drawing as the object depicted.



Roots, 2022, ink on paper

They remind me of botanical drawings, but instead of endeavouring to faithfully depict and represent the form, colour, character and detail of a plant, it seems you endeavour to faithfully depict and represent the form, colour, character of emotion but viewed

from afar, saying, 'look I feel or I have felt like this', then stepping back and observing them botanically, a documentation of feelings, drawn and stored. Does that sound like a fair analysis ?

Botanical drawings are so beautiful aren't they. However, rather than working from life I like working from stock images, they have a coldness as a starting point then it's interesting to me how I then interpret that. It's also interesting to take things from the online space and give them life. They are so metaphorical to me the hardest part is probably deciding which things to choose but there are so many images you really have to ask yourself what is the crux of what you're saying in using an image.

The drawings are like words in a poem, a single word that's a road map. One image of an egg that's been studied, the egg is me, turned over and looked at, I feel disappointed and elated at its progress. The journey of self reflection is very much like this. I enjoy representational work, it's formality is a refuge. As a child I always copied pictures, always analytical. Working out new ways to make something is like a puzzle, frustrating and challenging, it's a relationship bigger than myself.

So it's the opposite of observational drawing, you work your way back, to the self, and the initial selection from the google search abyss is less contaminated with excess emotion which produces clinical viewing, a subconscious theatre of thought perhaps

That's a great way of putting it!

You're an incredibly adept artist, being able to turn your hand technically to anything it seems, you even made phenomenal paintings in bleach at one time ! For the past decade you have honed your studio practice, you're very focused and work incredibly hard, what advice would you give artists who are struggling to find their 'voice'

I think I'm just impatient and very obsessed with detail, also stubborn and won't give up until it's how I want it. I never intend to turn my hand to anything, I just get bored very easily. I'm very tactile and my ideas often progress through material. My only piece of advice is to do what you love, what feels natural to you and don't worry about being like anyone else. If you work hard enough your audience will find you.

[Ma by Boo Saville is at T J Boulting, 59 Riding House St, London W1W 7EG, 6 May - 11 June 2022](#)