

NIGHT GALLERY

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Brie Ruais: Attempting to Hold the Landscape 2016–2017

Cooper Cole, Toronto

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by Jenine Marsh

Brooklyn-based artist Brie Ruais recently participated in a residency in a Nevada desert where she lived and worked in isolation for two weeks. This experience provides the context for her recent solo exhibition at Cooper Cole, *Attempting to Hold the Landscape 2016–2017*. The desert seems to ask: *How far could you make it? How long? Could you survive here, with us, or will you have to destroy us, clear us away and fill us in?* Most desert-dwelling animals live in holes they make or find in the earth (a cave, a dug-out shelter, a secret hiding place). And while many humans also live in homes made of earth (brick, ceramic tile, adobe), very few of us live in homes of our own making or occupy spaces that were truly made for us.

As a historically patriarchal and privileging medium, Western architecture does not build its spaces for non-members, and despite its assumed capacity for specialization, makes few spaces that seem intended to nurture life of any sort. The scale is often wrong, the light is filtered and the hard-edged spaces do little to hug our flesh or spoon our movements. And so, because so few spaces are for us, and no space is our own, we can only temporarily occupy, trespass and borrow. In *Attempting to Hold the Landscape*, Ruais' sculptures seem to feel this lack, and make moves to spread out another kind of space.

The artist's clay-based practice, founded in solitary studio work, finds a parallel in the vacant desert landscape. The clay she uses are dug from holes in the ground, and brought to her studio where they are spread out and opened up to light and touch. Not entirely barren, but difficult to grow things in, not a resource, not a mother, this clay is an *other*, a mirror body and an open space. The process of the sculptures' construction, their earthly materiality and the event of our physical encounter with them are held

together in the present tense, where somewhere in this three-way between artist, sculpture and viewer, is a figure in a landscape.

Most prominent of the works that populate Cooper Cole are Ruais' signature wall reliefs. In her studio, clay is pushed and spread horizontally across the floor by her body. Predetermined actions that test the limits of limb length and body strength are performed in collaborative resistance with a weight or volume of clay that closely echoes her own: Practical gestures of hands scooping, pushing, knees and feet dug in, her whole weight against the same weight of clay, invoke the struggle of moving a burdensome corpse, and, contradictorily, of tractionless sliding in mud or oil. Action and resistance fluctuate and flip.

While still wet, each of the large clay pieces is cut into grids of rectangular and circular tiles. This common practice of ceramic tiling allows works that are too large for a kiln to be disassembled and fired. Although tiling these works is necessary, the cuts break up the pieces just as much as they seem to complete them, not in the sense of arrest, but of activation. The cut grid allows the pieces' surfaces to be crossed as an inhabitable space, like a spider's web built over a hole, or a horizontal line drawn through a blank sheet of paper to signify a horizon. Made on the floor, cut up, fired and then hung on a wall, these works merge the horizontality of traversable space with the facing verticality of a figure.

The keystone of the exhibition is itself a horizon: *Landscape Painting with 130lbs of Clay (Dark Sky Law), 130lbs (AKA Black Horizon)* (2016). The lower half of the sculpture is matte black like charcoal, and the upper half is brightly reflective gold. Running lengthwise between them is a single finger streak of unglazed terra cotta-coloured clay. The two oval divots where Ruais' knees pressed in to the clay and the radiating finger trenches suggest kneeling, reaching forward and pushing the clay out from her body again and again to the furthest reach of her back and arms. She performed this move twice from the centre, once to the left and once to the right, with the orange horizon running between the marks of her left and right hands. Cutting herself in halves and quarters, between left and right, top and bottom, land and sky,

latitude and longitude, Ruais creates something between a divided landscape and the four quadrants of a fluttering butterfly's wings.

Two other works in the exhibition splay arm's-reach and leg-stretch into striking X shapes that might be more glisteningly fresh and fleshy butterflies' wings. But maybe I am seeing butterflies now, here, everywhere, since reading a section from a text Brie sent me. In "Her Body, Her Boundaries," Christine Battersby writes: "(a)pplying insights from the new topologies allows us to see how patriarchy might itself be inherently unstable as a system and hence how the slight flapping of the wings of a feminist butterfly might – metaphorically – provide the trigger that would enable it to flip over into a state of radical change."¹ The private performance of a singular body may still be the space from which all action must emerge and to which it must return: a figure in a landscape, a studio, a nest, a cocoon. The process is one of constant metamorphosis.

Alongside these large tiled pieces are smaller works, which punctuate and soften the exhibition: silver-glazed impressions of clenched fists that punch clay from the walls like tactile, sparkling holes, and three delicate wreaths or nests of white and red paper pulp, spindly weed, root and horse hair. In the basement space are six "Affirmation Pots," white porcelain pinch pots that defy gravity in equal proportion to how much they slump. They have been smeared with red and black glazes, and scrawled with hash-taggy phrases – *me too, grab back, I decide what goes inside, my body, my choice* – which are vivified by the visceral materiality of hand-formed clay. Their thin, finger-formed walls lump around tenderly gaping cavities, which seem as big as is structurally possible, and each pot is balanced upright by two or three or four mismatched legs. If this precarious vessel were a woman, her body would be improvised around not a hole, but a *space* in the middle. She is unfillable, and this *#affirmation* is as revitalizingly spacious as a deep breath. *Attempting to Hold the Landscape* spreads out a temporal space of organic agency that wasn't there before, in which the present tense is pushed to its tangible horizon.

Jenine Marsh is an artist based in Toronto.

Brie Ruais, *Attempting to Hold the Landscape*, installation view, 2018
IMAGE COURTESY OF COOPER COLE GALLERY, TORONTO

¹ Christine Battersby, "Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader" in *Her Body/Her Boundaries*. Edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

