

'CIRCA' ART MAGAZINE

ISSUE NO 4. 1982

NICK STEWART

Orchard Gallery, Derry
20 March—10 April 1982

Nicholas Stewart's installation is the latest of a number of shows to take place in the smaller side gallery at the Orchard in Derry. These shows, running concurrently with the major exhibitions, have given the public an opportunity to see work by younger unestablished artists. It is a welcome broadening of gallery policy, of benefit both to the artists concerned and to the gallery-going public who, having come to see what might be considered the more prestigious exhibition can avail of the chance to see work which ordinarily does not get much exposure.

This installation is titled 'Point of Origin—Sphere of Influence', and at the entrance to the space on a typed sheet on the wall are three quotations which together with the title serve as a lead into the work. The quotations are well-chosen, illuminating without being dogmatic, for all too often artists statements act only as barriers of pretension which make the work the more impenetrable. I will reproduce two of the quotations here to help clarify description and discussion of the work.

'The centre is the point at which diversities overlap. It represents that which is common and omnipresent'
from 'Black Elk Speaks'

'... Tara must have been a sacred site of kingship situated within the central province, Midhe, which was itself enclosed by the other four provinces of the pentarchy.'
... from 'Celtic Mythology'
Proinsias MacCana

I would not want to suggest that these provide a key which instantly unlocks the artist's intentions or that this would even be desirable, but rather that they emphasise elements in the work both formal and otherwise. The extract from MacCana gives the work a definite Irish aspect though not exclusively so since there are wider, more universal implications in the Black Elk piece.

The installation itself takes the form of two circular pieces, one larger, about 8 feet in diameter, on the floor, the other smaller, about 4 feet across, on one wall of the gallery. Walking round the large floor circle the viewer takes in the broader aspects of

the work, which initially seems quite sparse, before absorbing the more minute elements. Walking round and round the circle induces a contemplative approach to the installation, which it needs and indeed demands, since it seems to be about a gradual uncovering of layers of information and reference. The circle is divided into four quarters by four strips of cotton fabric, three of which meet at a small square mirror in the circles centre, the fourth strip lies short of the centre by virtue of being loosely knotted and thus shortened. The perimeter of the circle is described by a trail of dripped wax, which runs round unbroken over the fabric strips and over the faces of four halved potatoes which have been placed one on each piece of fabric. In the case of the strip which has been knotted the potato seems to have been placed after the wax has been poured so that the faces have browned and withered, whereas the others are preserved and protected by their wax coating. The ends of the fabric strips lie just outside the wax circle and are rolled round short lengths of steel bar.

The circle on the wall is made of mud, thickly smeared whilst wet in a sweeping action from the circles centre. To the top right of the circle the outline of the coast of Northern Ireland had been scraped with the fingertip before the mud had dried. An extinguished candle on a small bracket is fixed to the wall just below the centre of the circle.

It may seem that I have gone into rather laborious detail in describing the formal qualities of Point of Origin—Sphere of Influence, but one of the several striking features of this work is that the thought and attention to subtle detail which has gone into its making comes through very strongly in experiencing the piece. The mind and eye readily starts to organise the various elements of the work into a sequence of actions; the centring of the mirror, the unrolling of the cotton strips from the centre, the cutting and placing of the potatoes, the dripping/pouring of the wax and so on. The hand of the artist is much in evidence, and the process of making the piece, albeit a series of quite mundane acts, achieves a sense of quiet ritual.

The piece has a strong sense of 'site'. The axes of the floor circle read easily as the four points of the compass, though to draw too many conclusions about the knotted 'northern' piece of cotton and the decaying potato at its tip might be to stretch analogy a little too far. Obviously there is reference to the artist's own 'point of origin' but the piece also operates on a more universal level. Both the wall and the floor circles suggest that they have the potential for expansion; the cotton strips could be rolled out further and the mud smeared in an ever increasing circle. On this point I wonder why in fact the mud circle is the size that it is? The choice of scale seems somewhat arbitrary. The dimensions of the floor circle are determined largely by the four walls that contain it, but the logic of the work is weakened by the size of the small circle. In a piece as tightly organised as this, arbitrary decisions make themselves plain, so for the same reason I was left wondering if the stump of candle on the wall was really the remainder of the candle which had made the wax circle on the floor.

There are always dangers in forcing readings onto a work, for to do so runs the risk of killing the poetry which may be present in it by reducing the ideas to a series of banal propositions. Point of Origin Sphere of Influence has a strong sense of poetry and considerable evocative powers. The choice and relation of materials, imagery and process make it a very individual work which, for once, defies description in terms of likening it to the work of other artists.

Deirdre O'Connell