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ROGER ACKLING

Kestle Barton, Cornwall

Roger Ackling's work is experiencing something of a revival. Not that it had ever gone anywhere, of course. For a period of over 40 years, up until his death last year, the British artist and teacher used a magnifying glass, focusing sunlight into a scorching point, to sear freehand lines across the surface of wood and board. He exhibited internationally from the late 1960s and, from the early '80s onwards, had at least one show a year in Japan – a nation whose historic art and culture he adored. His exhibition at Kestle Barton in Cornwall, titled 'Sun Histories', coincided with 'Simple Gifts', an expansive presentation of late work at his long-term London gallery, Annelly Juda. As I write this, the Kickstarter campaign launched by the publishers Occasional Papers to fund a book on his life and work looks likely to reach its target. And, earlier this year, the young, artist-led east London gallery Piper Keys selected two of Ackling's 'sun drawings' on fruit crates to show in a group show at SPACE gallery, alongside work by Keith Farquhar and Lucy Stein. If, of late, the fruit container has become a symbol of global value chains – in the work of artists such as Sol Calero or Oscar Murillo, for example – Ackling's crates represent a sustained material investment that is a welcome antidote to so much contemporary work which practices louche material indifference.

Kestle Barton – a rural contemporary art gallery that occupies a restored farm building on a hill above the Helford River – is a fitting setting for the work of an artist who, for years, lived in a coastguard's station atop a cliff on the north Norfolk coast. On regular walks along the foreshore below, Ackling collected

small pieces of driftwood – they found him, rather than the other way around, he said. When coastal erosion forced Ackling and his wife to leave the coastguard's station, friends began bringing him wood to work with. The Kestle Barton show included 30 pieces made from wood of varying type, scale and implied function – some showing signs of oceanic facturing, others clean and hard-edged, perhaps shop-bought. Ackling often titled works after the places in which they were made; the majority here bear the name 'Voewood', after the cottage in the grounds of Voewood House, an arts and crafts manor, to which he later relocated. Tools – paint-brush handles, shovels, shears, hoes, rakes and forks – their handles seared, were pinned or threaded along one wall. Along an adjoining wall, the bases of various vertical strips of wood, embellished with plastic pinheads, lined, but never touched, a thin horizontal thread. On the third wall hung the brilliant brittle black rectangles of the diptych *Orkney* (2008) and *Voewood* (2008), a group of 11 assorted burnt miniatures arranged on a floating white shelf, alongside other pieces.

Families of objects were arranged together in an elegant ethnographic hang, cumulative indexes of solitary hours. Unmonumental, the objects conceal their labour. 'In these solitary, still moments with the wood on my lap,' Ackling wrote in 2008, 'the outer visual world no longer occupies my mind. Thoughts are reduced to a minimum and what occurs is a quality of engagement to an inner indefinable realm of the human spirit.' The last exhibition of Ackling's work I saw in London – at Chelsea Space in 2011 – included jostling litanies of floor-standing objects: the work needs this, or the other extreme, a spare hang to focus attention. At Kestle Barton there might have been half the works.

Up close, Ackling's lines are successive dots – threads beaded with burns. In soft, dry woods, such as that of *Outer Hebrides* (2007),

furry lines form intricate fibrous cavities – delicate blackened architectures. On hard, light-coloured woods – the handle of a rake in *Voewood* (2007), for example – lines sit more on the surface, cleanly pronounced, articulating dazzling negative spaces in between. In *Schoenthal* (2001), a centimetre-wide stripe down the middle of a shallow-dished block is formed of the negative space between two columns of horizontal lines; seen from shifting perspectives, the lines across the block's contour pulse and vibrate. Where staples or nailheads break the surface, as in *Voewood* (2011), they remain relatively untarnished as a result of having been burned – a primitive alchemical lesson in material tolerances. In their careful transformation of solar energy, they are the antithesis of the spectacular expenditure of Anthony McCall's *Landscape for Fire* (1972). It's quietly thrilling.

Ackling is often associated with British land art – particularly the work of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, with whom he collaborated on several occasions. A sculpture student at Saint Martin's School of Art in the late 1960s, Ackling also attended Malcolm Le Grice's experimental film unit at the college, becoming involved with the London Filmmakers' Co-op and making films himself. One of his earliest exhibitions was as part of 'Avantgarde Film' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1967. Paracinematic, capturing light and duration, his objects make sense alongside the works of avant-garde landscape filmmakers such as William Raban and Chris Welsby, who used time-lapse to condense cosmological durations marked by the moon, sun and tides. Quashing his sometimes-rusticism, this context of burgeoning ecological consciousness is another way in which Ackling feels remarkably relevant for the 'ecological thinking' practiced by so many artists today.

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