

Interview with Jane Prophet, “Explorations of Structure” by Lanfranco Aceti and Vince Dziekan

Interview with artist Jane Prophet initially conducted via Facebook during her online exhibition “Explorations of Structure” with Leonardo Electronic Almanac in October 2010.

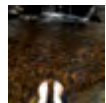


Vince Dziekan (LEA Digital Media Curator)

Firstly, welcome Jane!

Over the past few weeks we’ve enjoyed the progressive unfolding of the project you’ve put together in response to LEA’s new digital media exhibition platform. You’ve titled the project “Explorations of Structure”. Having just passed the midway point of the exhibition, it has become quite apparent how your practice is driven by an incredible curiosity. You’ve successfully shown how your work over a number of years has been underpinned by a wide range of interconnected interests, spanning themes such as the sublime and beauty, natural order and human mediation of the landscape.

To me, your work is constructed as a type of utopian project; and as such, its imaginative excitement can be described as coming from “the recognition that everything inside our heads, and much outside, are human constructs and can be changed” (I’m drawing here from the introduction to ‘The Faber Book of Utopias’). I’m wondering if this resonates with how you see your work?



Jane Prophet

My gut reaction was to resist the idea that I am engaged in a utopian project. But then I paused to consider that the notion of utopia is equally a ‘construct that can be changed’ and so I reluctantly agree.

The landscape theme in my work is very much about exposing how ‘constructed’ so-called utopian or sublime experiences of nature are. I haven’t been able to access the Faber introduction that you refer to but take the position that utopian thinking, while problematic, can be used to imagine alternative visions of the future, which is how I would fit works like ‘Decoy’ into thinking about utopia.

Writing about social change and its relationship to utopia, Tony Stevenson comments on John Carey’s Faber and Faber introduction and says, “it is where we store our hopes of happiness. But this commonly held notion of utopia as a good place is probably not what Thomas More had in mind when he coined the word. It simply means nowhere or no-place, devoid of either optimism or pessimism. Whether conveying either desires or fears, Carey sees a dilemma. In seeking to create a new world, utopian projects must destroy the old.”

This interests me for a number of reasons: Thomas More’s notion of utopia as a non-place resonates with thoughts of landscape and utopia. What is a non-place? An impossible goal? Something that exists only in the imagination? A place forever lost? I am also struck by the concept that utopian projects must destroy the old, which smacks of the tired debate about digital media and how they ‘must’ destroy books, face-to-face communication etc and reminds me of the post-human cryogenic fantasy of a disembodied future (the ultimate de-manifestation of the Cartesian project). The very idea that utopian projects must destroy the old seems utopian indeed.

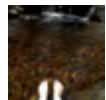
Stevenson goes on to suggest that there is, “a role for visions, or eutopias, as sets of ideas, in creating social change. And if a preferred vision seeks a future unfettered from the limitations of the status quo, critical thinking is necessary in formulating that vision...” This is the kind of role I hope my visions have, what I aspire to. That on a very small scale the works question and erode the status quo and prompt critical thinking at some level.

Reference: <http://www.tonystevenson.org>



Vince Dziekan

At this point in the unfolding presentation of your project, the most recently posted image is of an engineering drawing related to your ‘(Trans)Plant’ project. My curiosity was piqued when I recognized that this is the first time in the series that an image of yours has not been accompanied by a descriptive entry. I’m intrigued by what possible significance this blank, pause or breathing space might play in the overall exposition of your work. So, I’m wondering if you might like to bridge that gap by commenting on how your work connects ideas relating to the organic with the mechanical?



Jane Prophet

Good point. This is a page from engineer, Phil Cash's sketchbook. The image on the left is a still (thanks to Gideon Corby) from an animation that was made to give the engineer a sense of the movement I was hoping to emulate.

Why the 'blank'? Maybe because it is not 'my' image. But also, on reflection, it was an important break-point in the development of the piece. This drawing marks the moment when the graceful and elegant movement in my mind's eye collided with the stark engineering truth of aluminium/aluminum and motors!

We got movement which was less smooth than I'd hoped (yet actually closer to how those jointed wooden toys work). The whole sculpture became literally heavier and visually heavier.

During the process of developing and making the work this image does coincide with me taking a breathing space and taking stock.

We all moved forward and the piece looked much like this when complete.



Philip Cash

Interesting that you highlight grace and elegance here, where as my perspective at the time was much more heavily influenced by the mechanisms of the toy and the idea of the plant structure playing against that toy like theme.

In terms of the sketching and development of the final configuration, this was very heavily influenced by pragmatic considerations such as available materials and complexity. Also the idea of the toy weighted heavily on some of my decisions leaning me towards a more chunky design.



Jane Prophet

Yes, Phil, you are correct. The movement of the toy was MORE essential. There was always a tension in this idea between the way those toys move and the elegance of the plant. It was more important to get that movement closer to the toy (which you did, wonderfully).

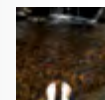
A number of the works shown as part of this online posting embody similar tensions, as I explore different levels or types of structure in one piece. In most cases choices are made such that one theme dominates in the end, and it's always sad, but essential, to let go of some interests to hone down and declutter the final work.

When the piece was installed I loved the way it looked so broken, then 're-formed' then broke down.



Lanfranco Aceti (LEA Editor in Chief and Senior Curator)

Jane, I'm interested in your response to Philip's comments about the animate qualities of your work. Particularly, your observation about the tension that inevitably exists between ideation and its activation through your work. You've been able to give us a real insight into the ideas and inspirations that have lead towards the realization of certain pieces. Given that, I'm wondering how you see your work as initiating processes of perception, cognition and audience interaction and how this sets in motion ideas and interpretations in turn for viewers?



Jane Prophet

Some of the tensions between an idea and how it is finally manifest/embodied in a piece of work are never resolved in "that" particular piece. This results in the 'unfinished' idea often being re-addressed in a later piece of work.

For example, 'The Blot Series' and 'Decoy' started an exploration of landscape design and its relationship to what we 'believe' is 'the natural'. I became more and more interested in the object and physical presence but could not explore that fully within the confines of those work, so went on to make 'Model Landscapes'.

Of equal significance to how subsequent works develop is the impact of audience interaction and response.

For example, if the ideas that I had intended to set in motion get reflected back to me by people engaging with the work as they talk about it, I feel the work is more complete. But often the audience raises important questions or has a radically different interpretation which may prompt me to go in another direction.

So, with a piece 'Souvenir of England' a number of people interpreted it as a comment on global warming (which was not my intention) and that response has lead me to reconsider my approach to landscape and to start to develop ideas that address contemporary concerns about ecological issues. I now believe that such issues are intrinsic to our contemporary 'reading' or understanding of nature.