

On Potency Filled Things

The title of Nicky Broekhuysen's exhibition ambiguously and poetically points to two central tropes in her work. 'Potency' could be understood as meaning 'being charged' and powerful, but it also alludes to the potential of something. Potency is neither tangible nor quantitative. Potency refers to an aura, or energy. It lies beneath the surface, vibrating and humming. 'Things' though do have surfaces. They can be picked up, held, played with, moved around, interfered with. But a 'thing' is not described with specifics, and remains unfixed and undetermined, allowing for open readings and associations. But somehow a 'thing' has weight, it is concrete and is manifested physically in the world.

Broekhuysen presents a body of work that searches for meaning at the edges of, and beyond the pictorial and physical realm whilst retaining an occupation with its inherent 'objectness'. In a manner that she has become known for, Broekhuysen intensively labours surfaces and objects, with binary code as formal and conceptual departure point, and which functions as metaphor for complexity, potentiality, order and chaos.

In March 2013 the artist returned to her country of birth, South Africa. This return marked a challenge to the artist, in part a coming to terms with her privileged upbringing in apartheid South Africa, and in part an inability to meaningfully contribute to a new order, as her family emigrated when she was a teenager. As an artist whose practice has been concerned with political questions often reflected through transgressive modes of working, Broekhuysen navigates this with an acute awareness and self-consciousness of her position within this complex emotional and political terrain.

But Broekhuysen also came to seek out, research and produce works in the remote Winterberg region, a mountainous and isolated place. This return marks an important shift in her practice, as Broekhuysen journeyed here specifically for its rich heritage of Bushman rock painting, which held a place in her imagination since her first-hand encounter with this art form as a child. Broekhuysen spent weeks in isolation in this landscape, producing works based on binary code, hand stamping onto rock surfaces, using the rich ochre and red iron oxide pigments of the Bushmen. In the context of the study of Bushmen painting, 'potency' refers to an understanding of a 'life energy', a spiritual realm. It is widely understood that the Bushmen considered the rock surface and painting as a doorway between the physical and spiritual worlds. The artist's actions, at once driven by transcendental impulses equally became about endurance, pushing towards physical and psychological limits.

These actions resulted in a number of new works which departs formally from previous bodies of work. The series *Rock Painting Sites 1, 2 and 3* consists of large format photographs of three sites the artist worked at in South Africa. Here the barrenness of the environment is visible, and the markings of the artist almost disappearing on the textured surfaces she sought out. We are also reminded that these marks will remain in isolation, and unseen in its context of inception. A laborious process of making and working will become a silent and invisible monument in the landscape.

To establish that the photographs are not mere documentation, Broekhuysen includes as an extension of her interest in the 'building blocks' of information and images a large pixelated digital photograph, *Through the Interface*, from one of these sites in South Africa. Here the artist brings again attention to the limitations of the occidental-centric understanding of the surface as barrier or end, as opposed to an access point or gate.

The use of red and ochre iron oxide pigments recurs throughout the exhibition, and is also a shift from the artist's usual stark monochromatic palette. In the work *Over Time*, pigment is moulded into small sculptural forms with its surfaces obsessively sanded, with these smaller parts forming a larger whole. Broekhuysen considers the use of pigment (as embodied in Bushmen painting) as analogous to binary code, in that both are vessels of information and meaning as well as informational building blocks. These two simple base elements are 'figured' and shaped, and by bringing them together, the artist asks us to bridge what might be considered remote and disconnected cultural knowledge systems.

In a further development, Broekhuysen more prominently explores sculptural installations, incorporating found objects from the larger Berlin area. This includes heavy paving stones, dating back from the nineteenth century, small cobblestones collected from the streets of Berlin, and marble tiles originating from demolished villas in the Brandenburg area. Here the 'rock' surfaces carry the artist's marks either etched in or as layered marks with pigment, whilst retaining the patina of time and the imbedded historicity of the objects. These stones are remnants of past physical structures now disassembled and literally deconstructed, and points to social and physical malleability.

The exhibition *Potency Filled Things* thus grapples with materiality and immateriality in its paradoxical complexity. As much as the artist is interested in the surface and structure of things, Broekhuysen also searches and guides to what lies beneath or beyond. In a process that is followed intuitively and out of curiosity, she uncovers and points the viewer to new and surprising conclusions. The works on exhibition brings together disparate visual strategies and histories, with the artist's own complex biography as a binding element.