

A CRITIQUE

Sacha Craddock

Elizabeth Ogilvie
Arncliffe, Bristol.

For Elizabeth Ogilvie the sea has stopped being a "subject" and has become a reality; in itself a meaningless thing. To say that as an artist one loves, or is even just mildly interested in the sea, might imply a part in a very long line that had Turner strapped to the rigging and Gericault finding a "real life" metaphor for political scandal. She had recently moved from Edinburgh (where she used to bring particles and found evidence from the shore back to the studio) to the Firth of Forth where she is very much there, beside the sea. The forth is a working waterway and Ogilvie's involvement with nature has nothing to do with a wilderness vision of the earth without man. Her particular association is in part to do with her family and generations traced back to the island of St Kilda.

Instead of illustrating the general fishy, slippery, sloppy, weedy, pushing, pulling, squalling, spiralling, perilous, drifting, shifting mass of her subject she makes an equivalent. Instead of picturing or illustrating the individual elements of nature, the work has evolved to become almost a mass of elements. Ogilvie has built up a matter of existence for herself with reflected and direct light deeply entrenched throughout her work.

Although the work seems generous and full at first sight it also appears autonomously unconcerned. The physicality is omnipresent and the role sculptural. Are people needed to conceive or activate the work in order to make the art real? Do they need to liberate it with comprehension? No, the role of the watcher, audience, or viewer is unimportant. Ogilvie cares not about a literal explanatory role. The relation is permanent, unquestioning, almost factual.

Slide aside the giant double doors and the sea is there as full as a cup. A rusty, rough working ship will work its way across from side to side. Islands, landheads, point, rocks, a lighthouse, sandy spits, and the open sea, with considerable distance in between, are simultaneously visible. The rare opportunity to follow the key and trace the outline of a map allows a real sense of overview.

Although the title Voyage - 128 Days and Nights might imply a journey from one place to another it does also, in fact, conjure up a generality. The sense that there is inevitable totality in the actions of the sea far outweighs any singular incident: shipwreck, lost vessel, man overboard, fish eating fish, dead seal or whale, petroleum leak, dumped platform, dropped anchors, electric cable, waste water, rescue attempt, or tidal wave. Numerous floating fragments are placed together neither in narrative nor aesthetic order to present a front, a surface as shimmering and as variegated as scales

on a fish. A "watery" quality permeates separating, breaking down, and the reuniting as it runs off, over, and away from an emergent rock.

The wire cascades that fall forward, like three dimensional drawing, from steel sheets, illustrates a permanent artistic dilemma - how much to "arrange", snip or tease, whether to pretend a "found" arrangement, whether to turn around and be surprised by a chance encounter with something you already know. The protruding wire, also, picks the light and runs with it in this pull between the natural and the "artificial". Colour, the man made manifestation of it, is absent; material (through its reflective, wall like, real role) allows a sense that it already exists without the artist having to make illustrative decisions.

It is only recently that Ogilvie has started to use words alone without the historical associations and ready made atmosphere that surround "personal" handwriting in a diary or book. Replacing the picture with the word can still suggest a particular artistic reference and strategy. But words replace images here because they are already images: used almost in the same way as seaweed or pebbles once brought back to the studio. They now make a whole mass of image that becomes as rhythmically permanent and constant as a view. Salt Book - Sea Text (1994) is based on incoming and outgoing tides over a certain number of days. It consists of a great number of random sea words screen-printed onto 40 boards which sit slightly on the floor and lean against the wall. The words function like markers (like paint lines at the side of the dock or pencil lines on a wall) to fluidity and multidirectionally register the changing forces at a particularly turbulent time of the year).

Ogilvie betrays a constant tussle between illusion and actuality. She trained as a sculptor, so an equal relation to the floor and the wall ensure that the viewer has a strong physical relation to the work. Two dimensional pieces play a "factual" role as they sit on the floor. Three dimensional volume, often held high, spills out into space yielding, for instance, the "real" drawing made from wire. The arrangement of the panels appears to be practical rather than aesthetic, affected more by gravity than virtuosity, allowing the feet to be as close to the subject as the head.

Earlier work with graphite and illusion were so labour intensive that Ogilvie was literally building with layers of detail in order to construct the image. Paper was made by hand; drawn upon it, or scored into it, were fronds which emerged from fine intricate painstaking effort as full and puffed out as if strangely magnified and waving gently from side to side beneath the surface.

Pacific Diary reflects the brittle stark conditions on the American Pacific coast for it carries a sharper reflective light. Sections of mild steel have been dulled, damped down, powdered with opaque, to reflect and calm a generally blinding brightness. The trees running directly down to the ocean's edge are encouraged for their dense cover which keeps out the glare. A faint fossilised seaweed frond appears on the right as if

permanently trapped on sentry duty being layers of hazy sight. The panels here, as always, act as walls for activity and light conductors. Ogilvie's relation to metal has changed and the material has started to look uncluttered and devoid of found or manufactured history.

Whether word printed into perspex, seaweed drawn from graphite, scrim cloth squashed behind glass, metallic paint and graphite made to look like metal or metal which is metal; whether using repetition, hesitation or deviation, Ogilvie still needs to direct or transform the material in order for her art to exist. But she constantly creates work which reminds of a generality, condition or state over which there is no real control, and within which she has played no personal part.

Even the boat that tries, when the water permits, to approach and land visitors on the empty "cleared" island of St Kilda sets up a pattern, for it returns and returns again. The initial excitement of seeing land never diminishes through repetition. Ogilvie's individual works set up a constant relation with each other that from early on have formed a pattern. Never does space recede from the surface in a visionary or pictorial manner. The work always plays a particularly physical role. Even the words marking out time and tide with permanent rhythmic beat, high to low, day and night, function more subliminally than consciously. The powerful sound and light that persist where the artist now lives and works are constant which are unconsciously absorbed. With no fixed view, as such, there is only the permanent presence. Illusion is on the surface, nothing leads one back into an individual sense of distance or vision. We are the simple creatures who work, holiday, travel and dive, beside, on, and beneath the sea and our relation to nature will inevitably work backwards from our practical involvement.

It was never a simple Romantic notion of untrammelled, untouched, lonely, virgin water. The image cannot be caught, brought and presented because it is always there. The black, grey, worn surface of a ships side, corrugated iron, battered asphalt in a pub car park, signs, slate, pitch and tar, roofing, paths, wooden life boat on slippery runs, blown up dinghy, furry cluster of salt against a window pane, discarded light bulbs, flipflops, or the four inch deep sear in platform astray in a gale are all part of a speedy "ageing" process where forceful wear and tear reflect the fact that the sea exists in no particular tense.

Island Within

Elizabeth Ogilvie

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