



Anne Athena | *Materialising The Unseen*

Anne Athena's aesthetic is remarkably lucid and though there are recurring motifs, her style is difficult to pin down. An oriental floral arrangement may be combined with summary illustrations or a Hellenistic nude. A deliberately naïve aesthetic is sometimes juxtaposed with an intricate pattern, or a sphinx crowned with an Oculus headgear. These nods to various styles, movements and periods suggest that history, and the way in which it is recorded, is her chief concern. Ceramic, with its archaeological connotations, is a fitting medium for this subject.

For *Materialising The Unseen*, her solo exhibition at JGM Gallery, Athena has produced a series of ceramic vases and sculptures. *Reach*, a ceramic plate bordered with curls, depicts an extended hand from which a dense blue mist rises. In a previous vase, *After The Storm*, she paints, amongst other things, a blue vase. This reference within the work to the means that produced it or the medium that depicts it reminds the viewer of how subjective representation is. It makes us more aware of the difference between reality and a record of that reality. The varied aesthetic makes more sense in this context. As viewers, we are invited into a world of varied visual languages. Unlike artists who heroically strive for "truth" in their work, Athena emphasizes the representational nature of art. Perhaps the preeminent trait, then, of almost all her work is its self-awareness.

Some of the more interesting works in the Western Canon depict moments of historical and social transition. Bacon's reworkings of Velazquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X are compelling, in part, because they juxtapose old ideas of grandeur with the madness of post-war Europe. Similarly, Turner's *Fighting Temeraire* depicts an illustrious ship of the British Fleet, made redundant by industrial efficiency. Athena works within a similar narrative framework, painting figures in a transitional stage of their existence: migrating across the sea or establishing a new society. This is reinforced by the varied aesthetic, which can almost be seen as a stylistic timeline. There is a sense of story, then, which is perhaps more difficult to convey on a two-dimensional surface. Unlike a flat canvas which, in an instant, reveals all its narrative elements, Athena's round vases disclose their stories gradually as the vase rotates. They thus produce a sense of dynamism and we anticipate the turning of her work in much the same way that we would the plot of a book or the final scene of a film.

This narrative element is consistent with Athena's deliberately naïve representational style. The viewer could be forgiven for, momentarily, mistaking some pieces for illustrations in a children's book. The work is constantly interrupted, however, by sinister and unnerving subject matter: a figure in the belly of a fish, or a bird with a face mask in its mouth. These intermittent juxtapositions between style and subject imbue the work with a dissonance and Athena masterfully vasillates between the innocent and the ominous.

Though Athena's work naturally causes us to question the veracity of history as it has been told to us, there is nothing pejorative about the way she conveys this. Her autoethnographic approach, though deliberately subjective, perhaps tells us more about the nature of humanity than any objective record ever could.