

WAYSOFSEEING

Philippa Lawrence crafts installations for specific sites: her aim being unite people with place through common materials, writes Jessica Hemmings



Bound. Montgomeryshire, September 2005



Bound. Yellow cotton wrapped oak. Maenan, Conwy Valley, 2004

AS A CHILD Philippa Lawrence planned on becoming a painter, until her foundation studies introduced her to printmaking in the late 1980s.

While painting provided a satisfying physicality, printmaking and the concept of the multiple became a passion that continues to guide her practice today. As Lawrence explains: 'Printmaking's processes and the physical involvement with making proved both compelling and deeply satisfying.' After completing her BA at Norwich in Fine Art Printmaking in 1990, Lawrence moved onto the Royal College of Art where she was awarded an MA in Printmaking in 1993. Now, she explains, it is the 'impossibility of multiples' that is at the centre of her increasingly interdisciplinary practice.

During her time at the Royal College of Art Lawrence considered herself: 'a bit like a bee. I would take the stairs, drop into other studios such as fashion and vehicle design, which are such different worlds to fine art, and observe.' Cross fertilisation is how she explains the crucial exposure to a variety of visual disciplines this time provided. Today her interdisciplinary approach requires a negotiation between the value of personal labour and making and the reality that professional fabricators can, at times, realise elements of her practice outside her skill set. 'The balance of seeking education, collaboration and knowing when to commission is ongoing in my work,' she explains.

Lawrence's is not the easiest artistic practice to situate,



Bound. Cotton wrapped tree. Cardiganshire, 2006



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which may be its first strength. ‘I would like my work to draw and to hold people,’ she offers. ‘It is about trying to sort out the bigger picture: to make connections between ideas, people and place, rather than just come from the self or be about my culture.’ In place of the cultural or art historical references that require contextual knowledge, Lawrence is interested in more accessible frames of reference. ‘Art itself is not a direct source of inspiration for my own work, it is the direct human experiences of life that interest me. I prefer for my work to be immediate. An audience can be frustrated when art only refers back to art, for the sake of art.’ Instead of art, site is Lawrence’s consistent, albeit ever changing, first consideration. Recent work has teased out snippets of forgotten manufacturing history in *Untitled* (2005) at the B312 gallery in Montreal, re-considered overlooked elements of the landscape in *Bound* (2003–6) installed throughout Wales and inserted suggestions of contamination into the gallery in *Swarm* (2002, 2004 and 2007).

Wrapping nature

As part of the Anima exhibition at the B312 gallery, Lawrence responded to the site’s former role in the fur trade. Fibres from the gallery’s previous function inspired a series of kitsch pompoms that emerged from a slightly dusty and forgotten radiator in the gallery. Lawrence admits a certain attraction to seeing elements of her work infiltrate a fine art context with objects ‘so low and unskilled’. ‘Children can respond to these materials,’ she says. ‘Others would have had the experience of having made pompoms themselves.’

Alongside a constant engagement with site is a bridge Lawrence often forges between handcraft, with its ability to communicate to a broad audience, and an exploration of the multiple, informed by her study of printmaking but now played out through a vast range of materials and techniques.

In the recent project, *Bound*, Lawrence’s intention was to wrap 13 dead trees, one from each of the 13 original counties across Wales, in coloured cotton. The realities of time and budget meant that trees in nine locations were, in the final event, wrapped and photographed.



Rather than an ecological statement, the work was designed to inspire viewers to look again at the landscape, to consider the boundaries that define ownership, and to view nature’s landmarks with a renewed sense of awe. The project required the purchase of a temperamental, lumbering second hand cherry picker used to navigate the wrapping of the branches. At times, five days working onsite were needed to complete the wrapping of a single tree. For those lucky enough to experience the project first hand, each tree presented a bold, inexplicable presence on the landscape.

The shortest installation lasted three months and the longest a year, with the final project now existing only through large colour photographs of each lone tree. Here a tension between handcraft, the multiple and technology is apparent, not because of the antiquated cherry picker, but because the exhibited photographs of these trees look, at first glance, to be created with Photoshop.

Seeing is believing

‘People sometimes can’t accept or don’t accept the labour,’ observes Lawrence of public response to the project. ‘Because we think we know what we see we tend to make assumptions quickly. Some viewers insist each tree was painted, for instance, in part because they are out of touch with materials.’ With a trace of both humour and horror at the real labour the project demanded she explains, ‘I repeatedly spent weeks preparing materials, ripping cloth and filling my house with lint before the wrapping even began.’ Ironically, the cotton wrapping did in fact provide new habitat for birds,



bats and wasps, precisely the opposite of what a toxic painted tree seemingly portrayed in the photographs would have offered.

Lawrence's interest in 'giving disregarded objects back some status' is present in *Bound*, but this line of inquiry also extends to installations such as *Swarm*. Its most recent version appeared at the Glynn Vivian Gallery in Swansea, where Lawrence enjoyed the culmination of her first touring solo exhibition last year. A shipping crate tucked in the far corner of the room was the first indication that something deserved closer inspection. Peering behind and then above the decoy was a trail of carpet tacks; objects Sara Roberts in her catalogue essay for the exhibition notes are part of the 'aesthetics of the everyday'. The tacks crawl up the wall and reappear around a small pipe jutting from the ceiling, suggesting a beginning somewhere deep inside the building. Amongst the metal tacks, one gold tack stands out, a queen capable of increasing her empire. Intellectually we know each tack is static, incapable of multiplication or flight. But emotionally it can be difficult to hold onto this reality. With a considerable element of humour, the work suggests that this multiple is not only imperfect, but also capable of its own slightly unnerving continuation.

Site, in the final event, informs Lawrence's every decision. 'Where place does not directly inform making, the work remains incomplete until it is arranged and placed in its final showing space,' she concludes. Site is, of course, yet another multiple: impossible to replicate, and yet tempting to try. ©

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Above: *Anima*, 2005. Canada
Installation with 300 pom poms and light

Top: *Another World* (detail), 2006
Found objects suspended on monofilament

Opposite: Details taken from *Soft Target*, 2006.
A series of pom pom targets made with Rowan 'Kidsitk Haze' yarn