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LAURA PIASTA: SOUNDING THE ULTRAVIOLET



Laura Piasta, From *Páginas Flotantes*, 2015

CURATED BY KIMBERLY PHILLIPS

The social history of marbling is a curious one. The technique produces a unique print: created by the interaction of pigments floated on the surface of a viscous solution, each marbled design can be captured only once, by a single sheet of paper or fabric. For this reason, and since its inception, marbling has been encircled with a certain aura. It was often used as the background for official documents and ledgers, in order to prevent forgeries, erasure, and theft. Having been practiced in Persia and Japan since at least the twelfth century, the art form was introduced to Europe sometime in the 1600s. There it became an important part of bookmaking, appearing on the inside covers and endpapers of nearly all fine books, where it functioned to mask the glue points and folds of the binding, and served as an aesthetic transition from the book's cover to its contents. Once associated with book arts, marbling became shrouded in secrecy. Practitioners, who were frequently rumoured to be wizards, were known to operate only under the cover of darkness, in obscure, unmarked locations, to avoid spies sent by the bookbinders, who desired to discover the marblers' methods for themselves. In 1853, the publication of a marbling manual demystified the process and made it accessible to a wide public, and abruptly shifted the art form's status to that of a popular handicraft.

For *Sounding the Ultraviolet*—the first exhibition to present the full breadth of Laura Piasta's recent production—the artist has created a limited edition bookwork of marbled papers, titled *Páginas Flotantes*.¹ In a simple act of reversal, however, she frees the designs from their customary position at the book's periphery, and offers them as the volume's sole content. The particular marbling pattern Piasta employs throughout *Páginas Flotantes* is known as Spanish Wave, as it creates the optically confusing effect of gathered fabric. Marbling lore suggests that this pattern was invented accidentally by an inebriated Spanish marbler who stumbled against his tray of inks during the printing process.

A minor art form, understood at one point as alchemy and another as domestic craft; an accidental occurrence and a spontaneous material response: I open with this rather meandering account because it offers a useful window into Laura Piasta's artistic inquiry. Piasta's starting point is always the natural, phenomenal world, and our (flawed, often awed) relation to it. She is attracted to materials as "actants," to borrow Bruno Latour's term,² to materials with obscure histories, with particular characteristics, ones that assert their own vibrancy or intelligence. She often concerns herself with forces or occurrences that cannot be readily explained, and which, as a result, might over time gather cultural associations of the magical, the supernatural, or the

wondrous. Whether informed by threads of scientific or historical research, or more directly (and intuitively) through an exploration of matter itself, Piasta's process follows this material intelligence along a path that does not presume a final form or outcome, but waits patiently for it to appear on its own terms.

Any mention of the "intelligence of materials" has a particular resonance in contemporary art discourse on the West Coast, as it is one often employed by the renowned Vancouver-based sculptor Liz Magor to describe her regard for the matter with which she works.³ The phrase may also be situated in a broader context, however, given the recent materialist turns in the fields of art history, literary studies, anthropology, and political theory.⁴ A reaction to decades of social constructivist theory, and propelled by such new strains of thought as object-oriented ontology, vibrant materialism, or speculative realism, these arguments advocate for a non-human-centric view of the world and a present a call to return attention to *things in themselves*.

"Vibrant matter," a phrase coined by political theorist Jane Bennett,⁵ might well describe the things that hold Piasta's attention. Of particular interest are those objects and forces not necessarily seen but rather felt, and which occur around us all the time. Nodding in the direction of an earlier work, which saw the artist encrust a found denim jacket in salt crystals as a visual representation of living geological time, *Magnetic Jean Jacket* (2015) re-imagines the workaday garment (with all its cultural potency) as a "natural" physical phenomenon, a material force in collusion with magnetic fields. *Acoustic Panel with Fringe* (2015) investigates another unseen force. A large-scale, hand-loomed black tapestry panel mounted on sound-absorbing mineral wool fibre, it is a work that quite literally weaves together a consideration of sound, painting, and textiles. In 2013 Piasta acquired a 1970s handmade countermarch floor loom—the type popular in Sweden and typically used for making functional household textiles. She taught herself how to weave (acquiring a working knowledge of specialized techniques, such as weaving or marbling, is an important part of Piasta's material research). The work evolved in tandem with her long interest in the architectural use of materials, such as fabric, to alter the physical experience of space. But—as in much of her practice—*Acoustic Panel* also offers a remark about the history of art itself: the woven black panel is at the same time a meditation on the modernist monochrome (not painted, this time, but woven with a household loom) and on the symbolic value of the artistic canvas (which, always before anything else, is a humble woven textile). Like the act of reversal that defines *Páginas Flotantes*, however, Piasta's acoustic panel throws us a curve-ball: its lower edge is finished with a long, lustrous fringe, troubling the ease of our ability to situate the work solely within the context of "high art," and nudging it more closely towards other cultural vernaculars altogether: that of either DIY artisanal wall tapestries or, thanks to Dennis Hopper's character in *Easy Rider*, motorcycle counter-culture.

The materiality of sound is also a focus of exploration in Piasta's *Stone Fruit* (2015), albeit approached through another channel (she was thinking here of things that have a loose connection with sound: bananas being the go-to pop culture stand-in for telephones). Arranged in a neat pyramidal form, a geometric motif of recurring interest for Piasta, the methodical repetition of a banalized, middle-class household consumable makes an obvious nod toward Gathie Falk's "veneration of the ordinary" as well as, I would argue, toward the surrealist concept of the marvelous. But once again, there is a dissonance: Piasta spray-coats the cast forms with a faux-stone finish, of the kind used in home-crafting projects, another irritant to any attempt to contain

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these forms within the parameters of “serious” sculpture. *Wood Sculpture for Light and Gravity* (2012) also has a loose connection to sound. Part of a larger body of work that investigated infrasound and the possibility of naturally occurring phenomena (such as the Northern Lights) to produce acoustic information, it was developed and first exhibited in Umeå, Sweden, where Piasta was based for a time.⁶ While the other works in the exhibition had specific functions, *Wood Sculpture for Light and Gravity* was more an exploration of form, the reorientation of a familiar object—a birch tree, common to the Umeå region of northern Sweden—cut into rounds and organized into a vertical column, and overlaid with 12 karat white gold on one side. As Piasta has noted, white gold has the power to reflect light in such a way as to almost appear unnatural, illuminating the surface of its application with such brilliance so that the form itself appears to nearly dissolve. Gold, she notes too, is of course so wrapped up in notions of value that it is difficult to approach the material in a way that does not end up speaking of it in terms of magic.⁷

At one point during our many conversations leading up to the installation of *Sounding the Ultraviolet*, Piasta mentioned to me that particular things—objects, or forms—sometimes gather in her studio and remain there, untouched, for a long while. They ignite a curiosity that she cannot easily describe. Rather than being an artist who can envision a completed work when gazing at a blank canvas or block of wood, Piasta understands herself as one who sees the block of wood or blank canvas for what they are. *Investigation of an Unfulfilled Form* (2015) is the result of living for a length of time with one such object—a wedge of yellow cedar, in this case, which Piasta eventually cast repeatedly in hydro-stone and in beeswax. The object is translated into “art” through this gesture, one might say, but at the same time remains obstinate in its resistance to a full transformation for our viewing pleasure. It is what it is, with its own agenda, forever in the realm of potential. And we hover around this set of material facts, taking soundings, which is all we can ever really do.

WORKS CITED

¹ Laura Piasta, *Páginas Flotantes* (Vancouver: Access Gallery, 2015). Edition of 50.

² See Bruno Latour, “On actor-network theory. A few clarifications plus more than a few complications,” *Soziale Welt* (vol. 47, 1996), 369-381.

³ See Robin Lawrence, “Material Intelligence: The Art of Liz Magor,” *Border Crossings* (22.2, 2003), 36-40. See also Sky Goodden’s recent interview with Magor in *Momus*, where the artist is quoted as saying, “I’m not conceptual. I don’t say, ‘oh I have this great idea.’ I say, ‘oh, I have this material with this characteristic. I’m going to explore the characteristic and see what’s unseen so far in its behavior.’ I use the casting material a lot because it flows; it’s liquid at one point. And it will flow into any shape I provide, and it will mime that shape. These are not ideas; these are things. I’m totally against ideas. Ideas are a dime a dozen.” See Sky Goodden, “These are not ideas, these are things: an interview with Liz Magor,” *Momus* (November 13, 2015), www.momus.ca.

⁴ These new materialisms are not without their critics. Andrew Cole is quick to point out the superficiality on the part of many practitioners in these fields in their embrace of these new arenas of thought, and he is critical of both object-oriented ontology and speculative realism, arguing that they are beset by contradictions, misguided assumptions, and outright fallacies. See Andrew Cole, “The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies,” *Minnesota Review* (80, 2013), 106-118 and Andrew Cole, “Those Obscure Objects of Desire: Andrew Cole on the Uses and Abuses of Object-Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism,” *Artforum* (summer 2015), 318-323.

⁵ See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁶ Laura Piasta, *Specific Objects Becoming Communicating Vessels*, Umeå Art Academy Gallery, March 17 - 21, 2012

⁷ Laura Piasta, in conversation with the author, November 21, 2015.

LIST OF WORKS

Acoustic Panel with Fringe, 2015
hand loomed cotton and wool fabric over insulation and wood frame

Investigation of an Unfulfilled Form, 2015
beeswax and hydro-stone cast of yellow cedar

Magnetic Jean Jacket, 2015
magnetic paint on jean jacket, rare earth magnets, magnetite, safety pins, paper clip, bulldog clip

Páginas Flotantes, 2015
Bookwork. Edition of 50

Selected pages from Páginas Flotantes, 2015
marbled monoprint on paper

Stone Fruit, 2015
faux stone paint on hydro-stone

Wood Sculpture for Light and Gravity, 2012
12k white gold leaf on birch

LAURA PIASTA completed her MFA in 2012 from the Umeå Academy of Fine Arts in Sweden. Her work has been exhibited at a number of institutions and galleries across Europe and Canada. In 2014 Piasta was shortlisted for the Contemporary Art Society of Vancouver’s Emerging Artist Prize; she was one of 15 finalists in the 16th annual RBC Painting Competition, and most notably, also in 2014, she received the City of Vancouver’s Mayor’s Award for Emerging Artists.

LIZ MAGOR is one of Canada’s most renowned contemporary sculptors. Her practice has addressed subjects from domestic maintenance to fugitive psychology, and her technical virtuosity raises questions and unease about the difference between the real and the fabricated. Magor is winner of the Audain Prize, the Governor General’s Award, and the 2014 Gershon Iskowitz Prize. She has exhibited internationally, including at the Biennale of Sydney, the Venice Biennale and Documenta.

BIOGRAPHIES

OPENING RECEPTION
AND LAUNCH OF LIMITED EDITION BOOKWORK
Friday, November 27, 2015, 7:00 PM

IN CONVERSATION: Liz Magor with Laura Piasta
Thursday, December 3, 2015, 7:00 PM

EVENTS

Access Gallery is committed to encouraging conversations that link artists of different generations to one another and to the wider community. In this informal event, exhibiting artist Laura Piasta speaks with visiting artist Liz Magor the work that comprises Piasta’s solo exhibition at Access Gallery, *Sounding the Ultraviolet*.