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“It’s what you feel, not what you know”: an evening at Exeter Contemporary Open

Emily Garbutt, Online Arts & Lit Editor, attends the preview of Exeter Contemporary Open and asks questions about the value of contemporary art.

By Emily Garbutt

On a chilly evening in mid-September, Exeter Contemporary Open opened its doors for the preview of its fourth year at Exeter Phoenix, transforming the venue’s gallery space into a hive of contemporary art and a much needed burst of colour, shape, and texture after a day of persistent rain showers.

An annual exhibition open to submissions in any media by contemporary visual artists from the UK and beyond, it provides a platform for talented emerging and early-career artists, as well as adding to Exeter’s vibrant local arts scene.

But what’s the deal with contemporary art, anyway? It’s true that it doesn’t have the greatest of reputations amongst cultural sceptics. “What’s the point”, you might say. “I don’t get it”, you might also say. Or, if you’re feeling particularly original, “I could do that.” Does this period of visual art deserve such a contentious reputation?

I spoke to Olivia Bax, winner of the exhibition’s Additional Award, asking what she thought was the value of contemporary art. “The joy of contemporary art is people making work they think is relevant today,” she said, adding: “it’s always political.”

Bax makes steel plaster and clay structures, using bright colours to highlight particular elements. The self-described “over the top” construction of her sculptures displayed at the exhibition was inspired by the architecture during her recent residency in Hong Kong. The utilitarian form and repetitive structures that appear in her pieces are hugely striking. She remarked that a “real sense of materiality” is “the thread running throughout this exhibition.”

She also stressed the importance of looking at images for prolonged periods of time in an age of constant scrolling and ever-changing online images; there is nowhere else to take your time absorbing something visually than an art gallery.

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Aimee Parrott, winner of the Overall Award, was also keen to defend the value of contemporary art. Growing up in a working-class family, she emphasised the fact that her upbringing was “not art based”; she said she wasn’t exposed to much culture or given an understanding of fine art, so she understands how it can be intimidating.

However, she stressed that art is about “what you feel, not what you know.” The point of art is to “open something up, make [you] think, not to ‘get’ it.”

“For me,” she continued, “making work is like a line of exploration... I never want to know exactly what I’m doing.” An alumna of Falmouth University, London-based Parrott was happy to be back in the southwest. She commented on the experience of isolated community that comes with living in a remote Cornish town; she knows she could not have produced the art that she did while studying in any other environment.

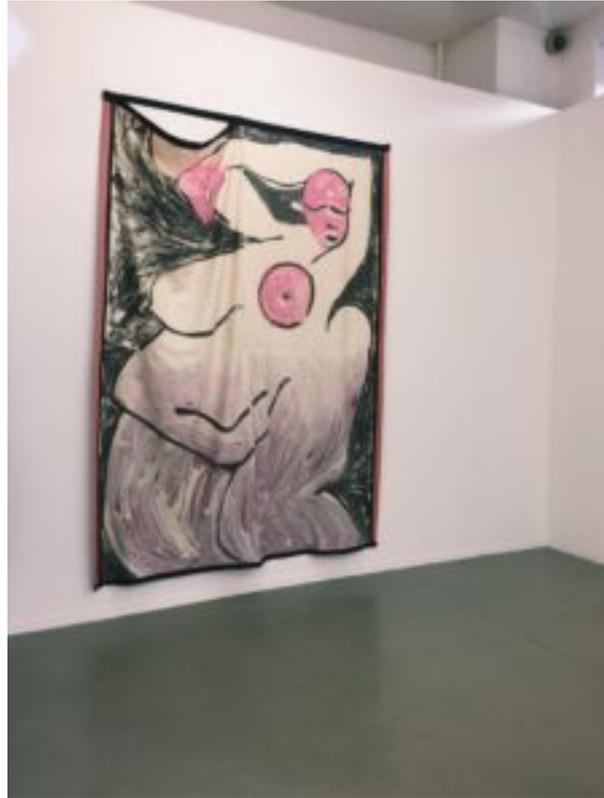


Image: writer's own

Her work often utilises skills and materials associated with traditional crafts, such as batik waxing or mono printing, that may now be obsolete and are often built through direct touch and muscle memory. For example, recent works, such as those currently on display at Exeter Phoenix, were made involving a technique Parrott developed using latex. The result is pieces that are somewhere between painting, textiles, and sculpture, focusing on the female form. Her winning pieces, "Banner", "Banner (ii)", and "Energy is Eternal Delight" are bold, imposing, and command the gallery. I am reminded a little of Henri Matisse's "Blue Nudes", particularly with "Banner (ii)".

So, what does any of it mean? But, more to the point, does it matter? Doing several laps of the gallery, I noticed something different every time, some new detail or shape; meaning is not fixed when it comes to any form of art, and contemporary art is no exception. As Aimee Parrott said, it's about what you feel, not what you know.