

MOUSSE Magazine

Reflections in a Golden “T”

by Tom Gidley

The artist Lucy Skaer works a personal alchemy from source material familiar to most – even if we are unaware of it when confronted by the results of her diverse practice. The images, symbols and shapes that she selects and manipulates are often politically charged, socially poignant, and always in a state of flux.



Lucy Skaer, *The Opaque*, 2004

“I am interested in the idea that the corpse or cadaver is a naturally occurring image – it is the perfect likeness of the living person, and yet it has become fundamentally different. My work explores the movement of images, and plays with the degree to which they are separate from first hand experience. Moments of trauma are structured into compositions taken from sources such as coats of arms and propaganda posters. Walking a line between documentation and symbolism, these works seek to question the way in which you read them.”

By 1917, three years into the First World War, the success of the German U boat fleet against British ships at sea meant urgent action was needed. Considering the problem at length, Royal navy lieutenant and marine artist Norman Wilkinson came up with a solution he called “Dazzle [or Razzle Dazzle, ndr] Painting”; complex patterns of bold geometric shapes in contrasting colours, interrupting and intersecting each other, intended not to conceal the ships (they often made them more obvious) but to limit the enemies ability to calculate speed, position and direction. These schemes were applied to hundreds of ships, their single purpose, and distortion.



Lucy Skaer, *Fabrication*, 2009
Installation View, *A Boat Used As A Vessel*, Kunsthalle Basel

It could be said that the artist Lucy Skaer employs very similar tactics in her work, which encompasses a wide variety of media. Often apparently irrational, contrary, wilful, even decadent at first glance, Skaer’s practice is enigmatic and elusive – though not open to misinterpretation, because no single reading is possible or desired. It resists capture and moves constantly, adopting different guises along the way. Like a U Boat captain staring through a periscope and attempting to “read” a dazzle-painted warship, the viewer is aware that the retinal confusion Skaer often creates is a means to an end. The very act of looking at her work and interpreting it is the essence of the work itself.

Skaer makes enigmatic emotional triggers from material already charged, potent and pointed in its aims. She redirects this energy not to create polemics, but poetic questions – questions about what it is to be alive, and what personal choices we make in interpreting this information.

Some works use source material in general circulation, historical images, symbols or diagrams, others have more personal origins. The film in the installation *The Siege (In Oak and Pearl)* (2007) is an example of the latter. A man carefully works a large wooden beam taken from the Cambridge college Skaer's father attended. He planes, carves and sands it until it is reduced to small spheres, which are then decorated with inlays of mother of pearl. In situ, they are presented next to the chewed up remains of the beam. We start to spin our own stories about what the work may represent, about the artist's relationship with her father and what may or may not have happened to him while studying as a young man.



Lucy Skaer, *Fabrication*, 2009

The Wheel takes its origin from an image of trauma at the other end of the scale – a historical moment, a potent media image so imprinted on the collective consciousness we recognise it even in silhouette. The Wheel is decorative, an attractive cherry wood circular object in two halves, its shape suggestive of Gothic cornices or the layout of an amphitheatre. Yet it is “broken” in two, implying uselessness, a rupture, and that break reveals the core, the original image in outline around which it has been based, like a watermark. On May 4th 1970 a Kent University student is shot dead on a US university campus, another student leans over him, clutching her head in horror, a photographer captures her reaction, people around the world watch the news that evening aghast. Time moves on, the image becomes shorthand for a standpoint on the protection of freedom of speech and civil liberties, a caution against unrestrained use of authority and power. Over thirty years later, Skaer renders it in outline, uses it as a template for an artwork. The wheel turns, the meaning has shifted, and keeps shifting. Momentarily it has been stopped – capturing the moment a person became a corpse forever. We know, as Skaer says, that we contain within us the future image of a corpse, that the moment we stop moving we will become a resemblance of ourselves, the same thing but radically altered. Yet we persist in living, and thinking, and attempting to communicate. Political protest attempts to galvanise us momentarily in collective agreement, to fix our opinions, in order to bring about lasting change – change that never lasts.

If at times the work seems too preoccupied with aesthetic refinement, decorative affect for its own sake, Skaer is entirely capable of loosening her control and working in broader strokes – or rather, working with the same degree of fastidiousness but on a larger scale. In *Pith and Kernel* (2007) shown in the Scottish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Skaer created three huge wall sized scrolls covered in dense monochromatic scribbles that poured onto the floor, obsessive marking that seemed to peter out inconclusively, until the viewer stepped back and within the dark mass made out the shape of Hokusai's woodcut masterpiece, *The Big Wave*. A second scroll curved around a corner of another room, resolving itself in the crude outline of a fanged whale. The viewer is left adrift by the graphite tsunami, only to be submerged again and devoured by the suggestion of a giant sea creature. Nothing is resolved, all is potential, yet the gravity of such compulsive mark-making on an outsized scale creates unease. Like the wave and the whale, or the dark

night that threatens to contain them in sleep, it is to be reckoned with whether we wish to or not. We cannot stop ourselves from looking, and making meaning.



Lucy Skaer, Installation View, *A Boat Used As A Vessel*, Kunsthalle Basel

Skaer has collaborated with the artist filmmaker Rosalind Nashashibi on several occasions since the two were shortlisted for Becks Futures in 2003 (they had a pact that if either won, they would treat both to a trip to Mexico – Nashashibi paid). A recent film installation *Our Magnolia* is a typical example of Skaer's manipulation of imagery with a wider currency to her own enigmatic ends. A screenprint diptych shows a parachute blooming in the air, a close-up of a work entitled *Flight of the Magnolia* by Paul Nash from his "Aerial Flowers" series. Alongside it, a stately photograph of Margaret Thatcher. A WWII era parachute opens out, time collapses in, it drops on a penguin-occupied archipelago in the South Atlantic Ocean in the early 1980s. Alongside this print is a short film. The imagery is diverse, yet connected to the screenprint; Nash's painting reappears, alongside real magnolia flowers in bloom. The corpse of a sea bird, analysed in detail. A man at a computer screen. And at the end, a burst of sound – a woman weeping, perhaps for a dead son, perished in battle.

The combined impact of all this emotive imagery is one of cloying sentimentality and of a desperate need for air, to escape it, jettison the dream. *Our Magnolia* is our collective sorrow; for individual loss, for the inability to grasp anything with anything like the permanence we wish for. Our understanding of everything is unstable, made all the less certain by the tug of time and reinterpretation. Like Kasper Hauser, thrilled and fascinated to see his name appear in growing watercress, we are compelled by the illusion that we can make sense of the world around us, that we mean something, when we know it is as transient and fragile as Hauser's watercress name. There is potential failure in everything Skaer does, as there is never a singular deduction to be made, no resolution. This is entirely as Skaer wants it; she is interested in (her words) "the movement of images". That is their physical movement, her alteration of them, and the change in their meaning this distortion brings about. We look all day, scanning everything for information and meaning from the moment we wake and open our eyes, and our eyes go on flickering behind closed lids at night as the brain recodes and generates new connections, and all is reflected through the golden, magical, momentary "I".



Lucy Skaer, *Screen from a Landscape and Black Alphabet*, part of *The Siege*, installation View, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2008