

ANIA TOMASZEWSKA- NELSON: ARTIST INTERVIEW

How did your childhood influence your practice?

As a child, I learned independence, relationships, hedonism, respect for freedom and a belief that I can change things. Growing up under a 'socialist' regime, through Solidarity, martial law, the first free elections, I had to be a grown-up too, sometimes. My father was a mountain climber and an engineer, my mother was a psychologist. I often thought that I took the space between my mother's soft belly and my father's strong back. In my artistic practice, I continue to use the skills I acquired during my childhood like using Lego for constructing, sketching, spatial thinking, or just its sound. Making Snow-angels in freshly fallen snow, in the studio performed and recorded as a piece of performance art. The snow substituted for white oil paint, the paintings of snow angels subvert the nature of painting itself. The image comes to life by 'unpainting', rubbing off a layer of paint (with my body). Snowmen, it seems fascinating to be able to create 'someone' relatively quickly out of snow. Their total dependence on humans and vulnerability to heat inspired my practice.

What is your interest in using fire as a medium?

Fire is an element. Fire is a destroyer and a creator at the same time. Known and used by the humans since the early Stone Age, it burns away what we reject and gives pure creative energy in return. It's a source of light and heat. Working with fire feels empowering and primal. The sensation of having control over fire is exciting and requires the type of responsibility I enjoy. Every fire is a process. I use fire for its symbolism, mythological connotations and ritualistic meaning. I have used multiple fires, green fires, ring-shaped fires, reversed fires and cold fires. I collect sounds of different fires and use them for my projections. I'm interested in what remains after fire is gone. Science, organic chemistry recognizes the presence of carbon as a proof of life. I know that in the old days I'd have been burned at the stake for my beliefs.

What is your interest in snowmen?

Snowmen only live in areas with sufficient snowfall. Making a snowman is a childhood pastime usually performed by families around Christmas time. Snowmen are anthropomorphic beings. They bring people

together. Creating a new being carries references to mythologies such as the myth of Pygmalion or Golem, but also to the act of divine creation itself. Once made, snowmen are left at the mercy of warm weather. Their 'death' from heat is imminent and spectacular. With the temperatures in some areas of this planet reaching deadly levels for humans, I draw a parallel, to alert and sensitise the people of northern hemisphere. To welcome the biggest ever wave of climate refugees to the North; coexist, share land and water. To design an infrastructure that will embrace rapid urbanization. To create a plan for sustainable food security.

Please tell us about your moving image work '12' (2021)?

This video piece followed the recording of my land-art performance from early spring 2021. In the year of Brexit and the global pandemic, all the values of a united Europe were at stake. The crushing of economies and the horrific crushing of personal lives drove me to create this piece of work. I chose the number 12 and fire as two tangible elements to provide the symbolic content for the piece. Their symbolism is woven into the structures of most cultural systems and religions. It takes 12 years for Jupiter, known as the ancient "wandering star" to complete a full cycle. For that reason, 12 is universally used in timekeeping. 12 symbolizes cosmic order and wholeness. Fire represents purity and energy. My intention was to bring back order; purify, undo; in the form of an invented ritual. I travelled to my log cabin in the south - east of Poland with the small crew, cameras, drones and sound recording equipment. It was a very sensitive time; the first vaccination programs against Covid 19 were introduced.

Tell us about your moving image where a snowman is set on fire?

A snowman coming to life from fire is an absurd twist. No more than Venus born from the sea foam in a large shell. The idea for this image was to subvert the mythological birthday of the Goddess of beauty. I recreated the recognisable composition depicting the birth of Aphrodite. Instead of the nude female figure coming out of the sea, I placed a snowman and fire in the centre of my image. The most complex part of this project was learning to make a ring-shaped fire. Traditional, cone-shaped bonfires burn as the air warms up and travels spiralling upwards in an energetic draft. Ring fires resemble large nests and need constant feeding but the image of a continuous burning ring is powerful.

Please tell us about the series 'Stays'?

The piece consists of 12 photographed stone stove-like structures found on the bank of Wisłoka river during a 10-day project. 'Stays' focuses on the short, temporary, site-specific comforts created by people in beautiful surroundings with access to water. The photos reveal traces of good past times, sharing food, smoking, and at the same time reveal the inevitable end of such times; abandonment. I found the little burned-out architectural structures deeply evocative. They echoed some ancient truths about humans and our universal sense of unity with nature. This project is a photographic documentation of a sculptural process. Each photograph records the effects of human presence and their interaction with the landscape. Assuming that a person in a landscape inevitably becomes a maker, an artist, or a settler, the question of the ownership of the landscape arises.

How would you describe the journey of your artistic practice?

I identified as an artist very early in my life. As a young child, I knew I was an artist because my making was treated seriously. I made my clothes from the age of 8 because I felt better wearing them. I knitted and crocheted outfits for my teachers at school, secretly making money. I also designed interiors for many of my parent's friends, turning around the small state-owned flats. I learned about the process of making art, painting techniques, and drawing very early from artists like Ryszard Grzyb and Teresa Murak. I continued my studies at Ruskin School of Art at Oxford University.

Growing up in martial law time, I was seriously involved in politics. One of the major illegal papers (Kos) was printed in our living room, the inks stored underground, literally buried in our family allotment (my brother and I were asked not to make bonfires in that area, the inks could explode). I still believe I can make a difference through my art. I give myself a voice. I regularly use my studio window as a platform for visual communication with the public due to its central position in the

neoclassical architectural style of the building. at the Ruskin School of Art at Oxford University.

Sum this exhibition up in 10-words..

Landscape, people, past, future, gesture, process, energy, freedom, space, myself.

Many of your works in this exhibition are made in Poland, tell us about how being in Poland creating work, compares to your studio in Brixton?

Most of the pieces in 'In the Beginning' were made or recorded in Poland. To use snow or/and fire as mediums, I have to travel to countries with a snowfall, similarly, to experiment with fire, in Europe, I have to be on private land with access to my own wood. Making fires is strictly regulated, in some areas totally banned.

I often travel to my log cabin in Beskid Niski, transform it into a studio and a 'base' and explore the landscape. The observations, photography and interaction with nature fuel my studio practice back in the city. My Brixton studio is my 'power house'. This is where I experiment with ideas, materials and processes, break the rules and invent. I also make a lot of work in Croatia and The Alps.

Please can you let us know why your painting of Rabbits began?

When I started the 'Rabbit' series, I was a 'full-time mum'. During the evenings I painted 'Rabbits' resting the paper on the kitchen floor. The core was the performative element (folding and unfolding) and the coordination with my medium. I let go of my control over paint allowing the unconscious to take part (at least with the reading of images). This practice stems from the Rorschach Blot test, the method used in psychological diagnosis.

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