



Have we been here before?

Kate Andrews considers the work of Aileen M Stackhouse

I.

“I think this idea of a ‘finished’ [artwork] is a fiction. I think a man spends his whole lifetime painting one picture or working on one piece of sculpture. The question of stopping is really a decision of moral considerations. To what extent are you intoxicated by the actual act, so that you are beguiled by it? To what extent are you charmed by its inner life?”¹

Aileen M. Stackhouse doesn't make *things*. For to make things would imply that they are finished. Instead, she works in a constant state of flux, disallowing the dust to settle with the passage of time. It is the relationship between humanity and time that beguiles her - a pursuit which has no end in sight.

Sampling from an experiential palette, she deconstructs and reworks her own past and present, as if in attempt to pin down - if only for a moment - the elusive notion of *now*.

While Sierra Metro's SMF series aims to place emphasis on a single work format, for this practitioner, no work could truly be said to operate in singularity. Aileen challenges the perpetual demand for artists to create 'the new' by generating a continual loop, in which she recycles each work into the next, her past feeding her future.

For Aileen SMF03 marks a return to Sierra Metro. She will revisit and reconfigure her 2009 solo presentation (*How long is now?*), bringing it into play with the present moment as a collage of time. By staging a one-off screening that will be accompanied by a drawing performance, Aileen actively highlights the temporality of her own self-reflexive working process. And in examining the effect of memory on a work made in the past, Aileen invites us to explore this subjective experience of time.

To choose to show, perform or exhibit a work indicates a pause, if not an end-point. This performance (choreographed to the artist's own bodily expressions of time - her breathing and heart rate), allows her the chance to draw new breath.

A thread of self-reflexivity runs through Aileen's body of work, drawing together the past, present and future. The artist's hands worry-away, teasing at the loose ends of the past. Not restlessly so, but slow, thoughtful and deliberate, before allowing the gathered strands to spring back under their own tension.

As such, Aileen's work acknowledges the latent existence of any number of parallel works that might be generated from the same composite of source materials. The potential for a detour always remains. A *finish* could imply a dead end. However, this artist's work operates in an awareness of its own shadow-states and parallel existences, allowing it to strain

¹ Motherwell, Robert et al. Artists Session, 35 East 8th Street, New York in *Modern Artists in America*, Eds. Motherwell, Reinhardt, Wittenborn, Schultz (1951)



against this *status quo ante* with a certain vibrant tension. It is in this potential that the work vibrates with life, and open-ends form relationships with their beginnings, much like the mythical *Ouroboros* who consumes its own tail.

II.

Drawing is integral to Aileen's practice. It links each work to the next, representing the most tangible element of her endeavour to pin-down nebulous layers of meaning and moments in time.

A body of research materials support Aileen's past work 'The silence of the Moon' (2011), and within this are some sketches that seem to emit an abstract spark of recognition - an odd sensation, one close to *déjà vu*.

In this work, watercolour, ink wash and photography describe austere Scottish winter landscapes, but the familiarity does not come from the subject matter. Something of a melancholic nostalgia seems to emanate from them. Though the marks are strong and expressive, there persists a feeling that no matter how quickly the images might have been captured, the light and landscape will not allow itself to be fixed for even the blink of an eye. Even a photograph can feel 'artificial' when attempting to capture such a fickle subject. And though something of the vast, frozen landscape portrayed feels slow, ancient and fixed in time, this sudden flash of recognition reveals that this landscape too is in flux - our perception of it only a fleeting impression.

III.

The old Norse term *Kennispecki* (the power of recognition) strikes an affinity with Aileen. An instinctual interest in this term drives her to return again and again to a particular area of research. We may be more familiar with the Scots counterpart term *Kenspeckle*, meaning conspicuous, familiar or easily recognised, but Aileen's choice is more appropriately enigmatic in its connotation. For her, the significance of these recognitions doesn't always come through their familiarity, but from the uncanny power they hold to draw us back, to look closer at the familiar.

Aileen draws her audience into the familiarity of her work, leaving them caught between the two ever-reflecting mirrors of past and present. If we have indeed truly been here before - same place, same space - then we can be fairly sure that it won't be for the last time.

-Kate Andrews 2012

SMF03 / Aileen M Stackhouse

that was then and this is now . . . a time collage for five minutes only (Sierra Metro 2009-2012)

Saturday 3 March 2012, Sierra Metro