

Tammy Woodrow



Tammy at Incunabula

Tammy is known to many members as a fine and thoughtful curator of AMA exhibitions, but not as an artist in her own right. The AGM gave an opportunity for welcome remedy; and her small display of abstract sculpture drew an excited and interested crowd even before the meeting began. By the time you read this it will be too late to see Incunabula, her first solo exhibition, currently on display at the Rugby Art Gallery, but closing 15 October 2015. There will be, however, a permanent record – which came about almost accidentally. For Tammy's most recent sculptures were all made with found objects, whose structural core and defining form was wood from a favourite but decaying tree, now felled. Small branches and peeling bark add up to a curatorial nightmare – insects! Tammy

belatedly realised that no gallery was likely to be prepared to exhibit her sculptural originals, and photographed them instead, settling after some experiment on a black background that further reinforced her existential message and elevated their abstraction so that the sculptures appeared to be floating in a timeless space. Tellingly, work from the exhibition has sold in both forms: sculptural originals, and photographic transformations that are artworks in their own right.

Tammy began her talk with a very brief resumé of her art career and continuing inspiration. A graduate from Birmingham in 2005, two recurrent themes in her practice have been the passing of time, and the marriage and interplay between art and science. Add in the early deaths of both Tammy's parents, and you have a powerful undercurrent that is channelled in, but is not overt, in her art, expressing itself in the works' dramatic tension and its play with metaphors of time. The death of her father resulted in some fragmented photographic images, produced from 'found' photographs, of sufficient quality to be selected for two local but prestigious 'Open' exhibitions. The trauma of the death of her mother, as well as the need to produce work for an already scheduled exhibition, was the catalyst for the present work.

It began badly, as Tammy overthought and intellectualised the process. Earlier she had referenced artists who had married art and science, from classics such as Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*, an exceptionally beautifully scientific work of 1665 that reproduced the natural world as seen through a microscope, to Sigmar Polke (1941-2010), whose paintings were intended to change with time through their use of chemicals. Such conscious approaches stifled Tammy's creativity at a time of more urgent need. She then allowed herself to play, and found her own sculptural language using materials around her – a dead tree that was charged with personal meaning; metal hardware discarded by the builders. The two were married, using her hands and instinct to guide her, and screws, bolts, and wire, to bind, constrain, and embellish. The sculpture became a 'vessel



'21' by Tammy Woodrow

Tammy Woodrow continued

for meaning'. Interestingly intellectual content was not abandoned: but it emerged with integrity, as it interplayed with Tammy's love of language, and her play with the meaning of words. Even the tree whose material connotation was death was also connected to life – family tree, family roots. A phallic-looking sculpture was given a fishjaw: in a dream world teeth can symbolise death. Gingko leaves, from a still living fossil tree, married to earth materials (cement) and wood carry a message of peace, hope, and vitality. These were sculptures in tension, unnamed individually, and intended to be seen as a group. My personal favourite was a hanging forked branch, into whose most slender and twiglike arm was screwed an array of window latches – an unlikely ribcage, and perhaps a metaphor for breath. Several people could not resist handling the most substantial piece, a gnarled branch that could be read as the torso of a woman's body.



'Extra 6' by
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To this, Tammy had fastened metal catches in the manner of sutures, holding together the two sides of a split caused by the drying of the wood. These were not sad pieces. Born of play, as well as grief, they drew the viewer in, and invited contemplation. The photographs – and Tammy, aided by Katharine as ambulant easel, showed a few examples – necessarily lacked the tactile quality and three dimensionality of the sculptures, but added new layers of meaning through mystery and dislocation, and qualities of abstraction.

To an audience of artists, the way that Tammy approached her talk was as refreshing, revealing, and inspirational as the work itself. She set herself a series of questions – essentially what, which and why – that she then proceeded to answer in a way that stripped her practice back to its elements and added to, rather than detracted from, the meaning of the work. Interestingly her reflection on how her work stood in relation to art movements followed, rather than preceded the work. The sculptural language was entirely her own, but she found she could place it in the tradition of Arte Povera, with its use of humble materials. Some of the best work of artists such as Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana has an almost shamanic power; Tammy's analysis of her own work was not misplaced.

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Tammy ended her talk by answering the question 'Should you curate your own work?' Her considered answer was 'Probably not!' But she applied the same rigour that she has shown in AMA exhibitions – more is not better, allow the work to breathe, look at the objects in the space, and think of what you are trying to communicate. Moira Lamont, who had actually seen the exhibition, could no longer contain her infectious enthusiasm, and shared it with the audience. Finally, what of the title of the exhibition? Incunabula is generally understood to mean books printed before 1500. Tammy invited us to think further, using the familiar 'incubate' as a key to open up the wider meaning of the word – 'incunabula' is earliest stages, infancy, cradle, origin or birthplace – all of which she could relate to her mother. The exhibition itself was dedicated to both parents, and some of the sculptural originals had incorporated or used her father's tools. Nancy Upshall, in her talk to the AMA about her paintings, had reminded her audience about the importance she placed on titles; Tammy chose not to title individual pieces, but her striking choice of exhibition title was as organic to her practice as some of her materials, and absolutely integral to the work.

This was a splendid talk, delivered (to its benefit) without the use of Powerpoint. The writer would like to add a postscript: a thank you to Katharine Barker for the use of her studio which, on a dark night, was a welcoming venue for both the AGM and Tammy's talk.

Margaret Condon