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Northings - Highlands & Islands Arts Journal

ROXANE PERMAR – THROUGH THE MOONPOOL

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KAREN EMSLIE investigates Roxane Permar's aesthetic perspective on deep sea technology

AMONGST THE leaflets and souvenirs at VisitShetland, the tourist office in Lerwick, can be found the work of local artists. The artists are members of Veer North, the UK's most northerly professional visual artists group.

Members of the group have exhibited individually and collectively in various sites in Shetland and abroad and currently show work on rotation at VisitShetland.

The only qualification is that the theme of the work has a connection to Shetland. Subject matter varies – for example, artists have exhibited local land and seascapes. But there are other ways of making a connection to Shetland, an idea that Roxane Permar has explored with her work.

Permar's work makes an unusual link by choosing to show work made as part of a residency with subsea engineering company, Subsea7. The work is not new, rather it was produced several years ago, but is being revisited by Permar in this new context.

Subsea7 specialise in deep sea technology such as the design and construction of Remote Operated Vehicles (ROV's). These extraordinary machines enable deep sea work to be undertaken in otherwise inaccessible places. Indeed they boldly go where no man (or woman) has gone before.

They were crucial in the discovery and development of oil fields such as Schiehallion to the west of Shetland and ships are frequently seen in Lerwick Harbour laden with such vehicles and underwater wizardry.

The residency was self-initiated. Permar was working with a small team of other artists to develop ideas for arts projects in Aberdeen. A chance encounter with a ROV operator on a plane led to a conversation between the two about remote imaging.

Permar was interested in finding new ways to access audiences and immediately saw

remote imaging as another means of reaching people. She approached various companies who were working with this technology and eventually encountered Subsea7 who were open to the idea of a residency.

She explains: “An artist’s residency is based on a relationship of trust with the company. We discussed what the outcomes would be. They asked me if I would produce paintings? I said no. Photographs, then? No, not exactly. What then?” Between them they agreed on an exhibition at Aberdeen Maritime Museum, a series of workshops in schools and the design of some corporate gifts.

Permar’s approach to the project surprised the company, “I turned up with my mini-disc recorder and camera. I began by interviewing ROV operators and employees of the company and viewing hours, days, of footage produced by ROV’s. I think I turned their ideas of what an artist should be on their head.”

Permar pored over the data produced by the ROVs, sonar images and technical drawings. It was the way that this data looked that fascinated her. She was enchanted by its sheer beauty, “Initially I imagined making a film but I was overwhelmed by the ROV images,” she explained.

Her response was quite simple. She collected visual data then edited and subtly manipulated it, making it consciously aesthetic. In addition she made a range of technical drawings and ROV ‘storybooks’.

Working in this way creates common ground between engineer, ROV operator and artist. As there is a shared starting point, the data, there is an interest in each other’s work. This being as much the purpose of an artist’s residency as the work produced at the end.

The work on show at VisitShetland consists of a DVD, several framed images, and the pop-up graphic gifts that Permar designed. The images are mostly monochromatic as is the DVD. It is displayed on a small screen in a display case and is silent.

There is something strangely disturbing about man-made objects underwater and I found goose-pimples creeping across my skin as the camera moves across deep sea cables, chains and ropes. An onboard light illuminates objects as the ROV peers into the eerie darkness.

The framed images are delicate and displayed in large mounts. Permar chose this format in order to express the contrast she found inherent in the world of deep sea workers. “It is about the magnitude of the sea. These are huge robust objects yet there is balance of life and death in the deep sea. It is about fragility.”

You could argue that the data was already art by virtue of being visually interesting. ‘Art’ is a loaded word. But Permar draws attention to the images and data by saying – look at this.

It does not need an artist to spot interesting looking things. Countless people in countless jobs work with material, objects and machines that they find interesting not only for what they do but because of how they look. Artists just take it a step further. They take what they see, create new things and make a point of showing them.

At the exhibition of her work in Aberdeen Permar had a wide range of responses from those she had worked alongside, ranging from the bemused to the delighted. And, of course, Subsea7 benefited from the publicity and community involvement with the project.

Many of the people who worked with the raw data looked at it in a new ways. One man pointed out that there were things lying around in their works' yard that were as interesting as most sculptures. Precisely.

Drawing the work together again for this small show at VisitShetland has re-opened Permar's interest in developing the project further. She sees this as stage one and wants to make more work with the huge amount of data she has collected.

The Subsea7 project led on to other digital projects, this time in Shetland, based on the use of technology in the marine environment. Permar's appetite for underwater imagery was awakened.

These included a young people's digital art project called 'Shetland's Cauld Waters' that was made in collaboration with Scottish Natural Heritage, and 'Fishtastic', a web project with schools.

Again Permar worked closely with technology professionals and the community. For example the young people undertook research trips onboard local boat, the Dunter III, which had underwater cameras installed for wildlife tours around Shetland.

And what of the poetic title of the work at VisitShetland? *Through the Moonpool*. Permar's face lights up when I ask this question. "It's what they call the hole that they put the ROV's through when they put them in the sea" she explains. Poetry, art, engineering and technology all jumbled up.

They are perhaps seemingly incongruous collaborators, the oil industry and the artist. Ideas and motivations may differ but there is often common ground in what people do - engineering can be poetic and art can be scientific. More fool us if we bog ourselves down in pigeon-holing.