

MAUREEN PALEY.

Avis Newman In Conversation



Oliver Evans: Today I am talking with Avis Newman, whose work *The Weight of Souls I* from 2018 is currently installed at Maureen Paley's Studio M project space in Shoreditch, East London, where the work will be on view from 10 June 2021.

The most recent works you have been developing are referred to as *Configurations*, I wonder if you could discuss the decision making process behind making these works and your understanding of fixity within the *Configurations*?

Avis Newman: There's been this subtext in my work since the 80's because of the issue of boundary, the finish of a work, and how you actually engage with it as a viewer, has always been problematic. Painting really poses that problematic. The activity of drawing opened up a space of 'unfinishedness', 'incompletion' and 'open-ended' activity that allowed uncertainty, paradox, contradiction, in a way that I didn't find in the activity of painting, and I think that is because painting has a certain or had a certain sort of authority. Drawing was a very interesting space of excavation. The notion of the white page as a modernist idea of infinite space or non-space was much closer to my ideas of what painting was. I also found that the space and time in Palaeolithic work, chimed well with those ideas and also the notion of 'not knowingness' we don't know what those images actually mean was very productive. So, drawing became a springboard for what I was doing, in whatever I was doing, whether it was making object, or making paintings, whether it was something defined by its material production or whether it was defined by its conceptual production.

OE: Your answer is quite interesting because you're referring to references to space and time within drawing that goes back over many centuries and I suppose when we look at your work here, there are, I imagine, a lot of hidden references for you, which are perhaps quite abstracted through your mark making. I wondered if there were any specific points within *The Weight of Souls I* that you would like to expand upon?

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AN: Maybe I should just go back to the idea of boundary and how we engage with a work, how we engage with an image. I think it's a relational thing. And to walk round something, to walk across something, to avoid something, to stand in front of something, to spend time with something, which is what we do with these objects, it's always that state of recognition of our selves. It seemed to me that the boundary of the painting, was unsatisfactory because it created a symmetry and what is so interesting with installational art is that it breaks down that symmetry. I am more interested in a work that doesn't have a fixity. That allows for different sorts of engagement. The title comes from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. It is spell number 30, and it's the spell that enables the soul to transition from the body of the dead and for the dead to go into the afterlife. What I liked about this idea was that the Egyptians thought part of the soul was located in the heart, and rather than the brain being the seat of emotion and reason the heart was the seat of emotion and reason, and that the notion of justice was located in this part of the heart.

The whole ritual obviously was potent and emotive, and the idea of having to confront the consequence of how one has lived - as all cultures do, they create rituals that make us all reflect on the nature of our lives and how we have lived, and *The Weight of Souls* seemed to be a good title for this work. It's also that idea of projecting into an abstraction or incomprehensible notion like death and the idea of some sort of eternity is always very attractive. The idea of complete nothingness is so fearful.

OE: There are three elements to this work, which seem to refer to an image of a bird. Are those drawn lines taken from a specific source for you?

AN: Birds have frequented my work, always. I like the thought of beings that are in two elements: reptiles, birds, bats. Those things that exist in water or in air but can also be grounded. And obviously the bird is a symbol of transition. But they lend themselves to mythologising, which is something that I work with, and of course 'birds of a feather', actually, the meaning is how things can be classified together, or identified together, and I use a lot of those sorts of ideas. It's very much sort of poetics. So it's about description and language is generated by the need to describe.

OE: Could you tell us a little bit more about the lines within the larger canvases that are forming part of *The Weight of Souls I*. I was specifically interested in how you've created the sense of a drawn frame within the edge of the canvas and how some of the lines meet that edge and some of the seem to almost describe another space.

AN: This work might of started from small canvases that are no longer here because the work gets generated from nothing and its arrived at in a number of different ways. These were canvases just pinned to the wall, and the shapes were then arrived at within the canvases, and then I got the stretchers and I wanted them on stretchers,

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I wanted to have some sense of solidity in the lightness. All these lines are gradually arriving at a shape, but not destroying the history of arriving at the shape, and the shape might be seen as right-angled, its according to what lines you are looking at, or it might not. So, I discover it as I go along, rather than have an a priori notion of what it is. And these small canvases show me a way of doing something or a possibility of something, so they get included or excluded. But it is also the thing that is arrived at isn't a visual thing, it's an internal thing, it is to do with balance. That's why we start with that right-angle, and a right-angle isn't a formal thing, it's an emotional thing.

OE: You've talked about the axis in this piece, which defines how it's installed, and also the significance of balance between the elements, and I wondered if you could also tell us a little bit more about the use of colour and also the fact that you, as I understand, make your own pigments and paint.

AN: I am actually not terribly interested in colour. I am much more interested in weight and density and temperature. So, the judgements that I make are of that order and not of the order of hue, of how one colour sits against another colour, or those sorts of ideas, but if there is a choice of colour as a yellowness or a redness it's often of a practical significance, so in that sense, colour goes over my head.

OE: When we were installing the work, it was interesting to me to see how the layers of paint had seeped through the material of the canvas and you could get a sense that it's not just one layer of colour which is applied, it's obviously many different blacks, or many different layers of pigment, which have layered up over time.

AN: Yes, it is exactly that. So that the surface, or the body of the thing, has its density. Kandinsky talks about silent colour and I liked that phrase because colours talk to each other and I prefer the

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silence of a physical body, rather than a visual body. It sounds paradoxical, but yes that's why most of my work is either very light or very dark.

OE: One element of this work consists of a stretched canvas, which appears to be torn or cut and I was wondering if you had started with the idea of having this incision in the canvas or if something was removed?

AN: I took the canvas off [the stretcher] I just cut it off, and it looked righter, but of course what it also addresses is that notion of absence, there's something missing, and that is a very emotive thing in a piece of work. As well as that, it's showing the bones of what painting is: the stretcher, the canvas, so it works on a number of different levels. And of course, another layer of all the work is 'what is the nature of making a painting'? 'What are we doing'? So, there is that continuous sort of 'sand in the shoe', so to speak; some irritant that is worrying constantly, and that's one of my little worries.

In some way, the work we make is a reflection back on our own instability of self. This work is, although there is that notion of balance in it, the consequence of this sort of formal balance, is of course the unknowingness of how we travel that road after death. The undercurrent of my work is the anxiety about the human condition, and it is actualised in that lack of fixity.

