



Emma Bennett

Hearing from Artists

Through painting, drawing and sculpture, Emma Bennett depicts post-war architecture to make a claim for its beauty and social importance. Her works Slant and Tower (Version 2) were acquired for the Middlesbrough Collection through the Tees Valley Response Collecting scheme. Here, she is in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator, in September 2020

HW: Your work examines Modernist and post-war architecture and personal memory. How did you start making paintings about these things?

EB: Places and the experience of walking around the built environment have always played a central role in my practice. During my B.A. Fine Art course, I began to look at the urban landscape and graffiti. At this time, I was taking a lot of photographs around Middlesbrough and from this I discovered that I wanted to investigate architecture further. So when I rented my first studio on Gilkes Street, Middlesbrough, I started to make paintings based on the spaces and structures that I could see from my studio window which were well known territories to me. These included the Bus Station and the Hill Street Centre.

I made colourful works at this time and I was influenced by paintings and sculptures of the St. Ives School, an influential artistic community living and working in St Ives, Cornwall in the early twentieth century. I



Emma Bennett Portrait. Photograph by J. Rowcroft

began to seek out buildings to explore in my practice and found myself walking around the town often taking different routes as I sought inspiration, one of which was through the Teesside University campus, passed the Constantine Building where I had studied my degree.

In 2014 I was accepted onto the Artists Access to Art Colleges (AA2A) residency which gave me access to this building again and its art facilities for a year. My project involved looking at some of the internal features of the Constantine Building which was originally built as Constantine College in 1930. I made a series of circular paintings on wood to reference the teak wooden lockers that were located around the building, the sort you get in old schools and colleges. The building had a particular smell which reminded me of the science labs from school.

Around this time, I made a series of paintings and a site-specific wall painting in response to the closure of Middlesbrough's Register Office, which were shown in my solo exhibition *Altered Space* at Platform A Gallery, Middlesbrough, 2016/17. The Register Office, which was opened in 1973, had been designed by local Architect, J. V. Wall, F.R.I.B.A., was a well-used public building. I registered my own son's birth there and like many people, felt connected to the place. Sadly, it was demolished and a new office block stands on the site now. Many of my paintings are about a nostalgic attachment to places and structures



Register Office (Still Standing) 2016, acrylic on wall. Photograph by Anthony Chambers

that are often overlooked, neglected or under threat of demolition and lost forever.

HW: What techniques and strategies do you use when approaching a particular building or site to make new work?

EB: This depends on the type of project I'm working on. I make paintings, drawings, sculptures and wall paintings but nearly always the place is known to me. I need to feel a connection to a place, whether through using the building personally or getting to know it by visiting it many times. I look at the style of the architecture, the materials it has been built with, its function and relationship to its surroundings. I then do a little research, mainly into when it was built and how it looked when it was brand-new. Once I've decided on a place I take photographs from different viewpoints. I start by looking at the building outlines and its dominant shapes in the photographs. I pursue a project if I feel that it will sustain my interest and develop my ideas. Then follows what materials to use, I almost always use paint but the surface I paint onto (the ground) can differ. Sometimes I paint directly onto wood such as un-primed

ash veneer. I also make my own concrete panels and have also painted onto antique and vintage maps.

Say I'm making a new painting series, I begin with an initial idea of what I would like to achieve or develop. I then consider the scale; the space in front of me; the colours; and the relationship between each individual section. The colours are mostly decided beforehand although sometimes things change or develop in unexpected ways. I test out various colour combinations often trying something new if I become too reliant on a particular group of colours for too long. I don't plan the paintings although I may sketch out some of the major forms as a starting point. The work develops through a set of decisions about the relationships between colour and form. I work on a group of paintings simultaneously and I spend a lot of time looking and deciding what to do next. The pieces I'm working on usually inform the subsequent works.

HW: What is the relationship between image-making and photography in your practice?



Proximity 2019, acrylic and vinyl on wall and concrete. Photograph by Kev Howard

EB: Photographs are an essential tool in my work. I use them as reference material for my pieces and they allow me to spend more time making work. My works are not direct copies from photographs, rather, my intention is to make an image that hints at a place that you may have seen, remembered or imagined. My chosen imagery is based on real places, however, I slightly distort or over-emphasize their forms and add vibrant colours to offer an impression of an imagined place. My intention is to flatten the image and sometimes, whilst testing out ideas, the photographs become part of a collage and I replace doors and windows with coloured patterned paper. Often the shapes in my paintings become recognisable motifs that I reuse over and over again.

HW: Your artworks *Slant*, 2017 and *Tower (Version 2)*, 2018 joined the Middlesbrough Collection through the Tees Valley Response Collecting Initiative. Can you describe the paintings and the resonances of the site they depict?

EB: *Slant* is acrylic on MDF board, 30 x 20cm and was made in 2017. It shows a simple

structure standing at a slightly slanted angle. The shape is taken from a photograph of the architectural structure that forms a walkway into the Constantine Building and adjoining Middlesbrough Tower on the Teesside University campus. The rectangle is divided into a black and white pattern and is placed on top of a pale violet stand. I used bright yellow in the foreground in contrast with the pale violet. The background is split into two colours, on the left burgundy to represent the Constantine Building and on the right a stark white to signify Middlesbrough Tower which you can see when approaching the front of the building. The painting was part of the first series of works made when I returned to Teesside University to study M.A Fine Art. This was the first time that I introduced pattern into my work. This new approach was informed by my research into artist Anni Albers and her use of pattern in screen-prints and tapestry weaving. I particularly like the idea of an 'interrupted pattern' which is when a pattern or line is altered or interrupted.

I made *Tower (Version 2)* in 2018 to develop my original *Tower* painting from the 2017 series. Again it is acrylic on MDF board and



Slant 2017, acrylic on MDF board. Photograph by J. Photographers



Tower (Version 2) 2018, acrylic on MDF board. Photograph by Emma Bennett

30 x 20cm. A black and white chequered form is outlined with a bright zingy yellow. To each side, large bands of colour appear to run through the shape. The colours are burgundy and pale violet and are alternated at each side of the tower. The painting is an impression of Middlesbrough Tower and like *Slant* continues work from my 2016/17 AA2A placement at the university, when I used photography to document areas of the Constantine Building that were physically connected to the Middlesbrough Tower. The adjoining Middlesbrough Tower was built in 1963 and the points of contact between the two building echo both Modernist and post-war design which were fundamental to my practice at the time.

Subsequently, I made a series of paint studies that developed into concrete paintings. The hand-made concrete painted panels reference the concrete found in many post-war buildings. I painted doorways, corridors and stairways directly onto the concrete to depict the areas used to pass through the connecting buildings. When I returned to complete my M.A in autumn 2017, I continued to look at the same spaces although my focus now turned to the exterior architecture. My final show *Proximity* developed into an installation in which I produced a large wall painting and series of concrete works. Both university buildings play a significant role in my practice and I return to them as a subject matter again and again.