

ENDLESS PROLIFERATION

The work of Helen Scalway

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Preparing to write about the work of Helen Scalway, I find myself seeking the wisdom of Alain Badiou. Before even opening the book I'm searching for, the title *Infinite Thought* strikes me as apt for Helen's work. Growth, change, encounter, connection, time, sequence, flow, centres and peripheries, these are words Helen uses to describe her work. Revolt, logic, universality and risk are the words Badiou uses to describe the four dimensions of the desire of philosophy; the desire to think powerfully and convincingly on ourselves and the state of our world. Helen's work demonstrates a wrangle with this "desire of philosophy".

Her imagery often presents a mesh of entanglements and encounters that verge on the chaotic. But reluctant to settle for chaos as an end to itself, she pushes her work further into a chaos which annuls those original chaotic elements. It's a sort of check and subversion which makes the chaos look like intentional structure and rhythm, a very interesting thing within a pervasive context of algorithms in mass communications today. This very predicament in her imagery reveals the truth of Badiou's claims of the pressures on philosophy.¹ The pattern and rhythm of her marks lead to tipping points and the catastrophe of change "as one set of circumstances become so stressed a change comes about and another set of circumstances arises," she says.² Helen borrows the phrase, "Endless Proliferation", from Adam Hardy³ to describe "Cosmologies", one of her online portfolios. It contains delicate images spanning influences of Renaissance perspective, the Hindu endless regeneration of space and the infinitely repeated pattern of Islam. The combination of these vastly different cultures, theories and philosophies are an extension of her thinking about the shape of the world made by the frenetic jostling of cultures in a cosmopolitan city.⁴

¹ Badiou, Alain, *Infinite Thought*, Continuum, London/New York, 2005 reprinted 2011, trans. & ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens. pp. 30-31 "*I think that the contemporary world, our world, the world that we strive to think and transform, exerts an intense pressure upon these four dimensions of the desire of philosophy; such that all four dimensions, faced by the world, find themselves in a difficult and dark passage in which the destiny and even the very existence of philosophy is at stake.*" In the lines following this quote, Badiou describes the pressures our 'Western' world makes on philosophy. Our world does not engage in thought as revolt because it already calls itself 'the free world', a freedom which has been commercialized and commodified. Logic is under pressure by a "*profoundly illogical regime of communication*", a mass communication which is fragmented, disjointed and devoid of memory. Universality is challenged by our world through specialization; a technical and specialized knowledge that defies what is "*valid for all thinking*". And finally risk is out of favour in our world because "*nobody has the means any more to submit their existence to the perils of chance*".

² Quotes are from personal discussions with Helen about her work. March 6, 2014

³ Hardy, Adam, "Form, Transformation and Meaning in Indian Temple Architecture" from *Paradigms of Indian Architecture*, ed. GHR Tillotson, 1998, Collected papers on South Asia, vol. 13. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, UK, pp 107-135

⁴ See: <http://www.helenscalway.com/cosmologies/> accessed 24 March, 2014

As if this isn't contentious enough, Helen refuses to "quarrel with her aesthetic," as she puts it. She accepts the delicate colours and the aesthetic organization of marks in her work rather than fight with them and the world she's chosen to confront. A war on two fronts is seldom successful. Interestingly her work is not beautiful, it's aesthetically powerful; a testament to her decision not to quarrel. But this doesn't stop her from pointing out works she considers to have failed. What I see in those rejected works are simply thoughts that lost their way, meaning the work hasn't reached the powerful pitch of 'encounter' of her more successful pieces. However, any of her rejected works could easily be reconsidered again, finding a new thread of thought to follow; Helen's 'failures' are simply a layer waiting for the next instalment of thought to arrive. Layering is key to what Helen visualizes, not only conceptually in considering her themes, but also in constructing work and making marks. Strikingly, the work she made as a student in 1995 sits comfortably nearly 20 years later with current work in progress. Proof that time is one more layer Helen uses to her advantage.

Helen's work has resonance; it hums with tension, strain, rhythm and frenzy. It isn't comfortable work, but it is confident, especially in its own logic. It's the kind of confidence visible in the work of the artists she admires, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Joseph Gandy, Chinese landscape masters of the 14th and 15th century, Cy Twombly, Mark Tobey and Julie Mehretu. Like these artists, hers is a confidence that goes to a place others do not go and questions things others take for granted, the kind of confidence that establishes its own philosophical centre and quietly gets on with the revolution.