

VALENTINA PALONEN'S *Power Things*

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On France's west coast, people have been playing with stones. Dotted the landscape around the village of Carnac are arrangements of menhirs, large rocks that have been stood vertically, many the height of a person and some much taller. Predating their more celebrated cousins of Stonehenge, thousands of the large rocks have been placed in circles and lines across the countryside. Theories of the reason (and the method) for their construction are diverse. A widely held belief is that the alignments acted as a kind of astrological calendar, that certain arrangements tracked, or were used to predict, the passage of celestial bodies. Another holds that the alignments form a prehistoric method of earthquake detection. A further theory suggests that their arrangement implies a belief in a power that is inherent to the stones themselves, of healing or protective qualities – as though it were the act of aligning the giant rocks that would allow this power, somehow, to be harnessed.

Valentina Palonen's *Power Things* brings together two bodies of work made by the artist in 2012. Each made during an artist residency, the works are unified by the contrast between the natural objects depicted and the overtly synthetic materials in which they are cast. The works are presented reverentially, bound or carefully arranged, so that each piece, despite its synthetic nature, implies some latent agency – what Palonen presents in *Power Things* is a view of the natural world imbued with inherent, though unseen, powers.

A series of new wall mounted sculptures are presented, continuing the artist's interest in the notion of the contemporary talisman, and were made during a residency in Launceston in Tasmania last autumn. During this time Palonen put into practice a kind of 'catch and release' methodology for gathering the inanimate natural objects that would become the subjects of the casts presented here. Palonen sourced sticks, stones, pine cones and other natural phenomena from the wilderness that closely borders the town, and moulds were taken from them back in the studio. Like a scientist tagging a sedated animal before releasing it back into its habitat, the artist noted the exact spot from which each piece was taken and, after performing her documentation of the thing by taking a mould, returned the object to its original resting spot.

The natural objects she depicts are made strange through casting, and Palonen augments the uncanny nature of her casts through artificial colour and binding so that each piece has the seeming of an apparently banal thing made sacred, a talisman. Moreover, in performing the ritual of collection and return, each synthetic talisman is bound to a place, the particular geographic context that its original inhabited and now inhabits once more. Though overtly artificial, these objects are thus given life by the memories they embody; the memory of the object and, by extension, the memory of the dynamic landscape from which it came.

Central to the exhibition, and extending the exploration of agency and place that the Tasmanian works began, is a circle of cast rocks titled *Sympathetic Circle* (2012), the second in an ongoing series

of works under the banner of *The Circle Project*. In Paris during the European summer this year, Palonen again observed the process of collection and return, this time in the natural and urban areas around the site of her residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts. Over three months Palonen collected small rocks from parks, fragments of tiles and paving from the streets, blocks of concrete from nearby construction sites. As with the Launceston works, the original location of each stone was painstakingly recorded, until thirty pieces had been collected, recorded, and a mould taken from each. On the 22nd of August, the autumn equinox in the northern hemisphere, the artist took the eclectic collection of rocks to a site where one of them had been found; a hilly and popular park in Paris' north east called Parc des Buttes Chaumont. On a hillside there she constructed a circle from the stones, still encased in their rubber sock moulds. After the passing of the equinox the circle was dismantled, and over the following week the fragments were returned diligently to their original locations in the streets and parks of Paris.

A complex set of relations is formed in the making of this piece – Palonen intentionally loads the work with references, but they are ambiguous and unfixed. As each cast has a doppelganger existing somewhere in Paris, each is an index of both an object and a place, as in the Tasmanian works. In *Sympathetic Circle*, however, a further indexical link is formed by the creation of the circle. By making a ring, and performing its first incarnation during the equinox, the artist invokes the sacred geometry associated with celestial movements and Neolithic rock formations alike, contextualizing her stone circle within the historical, theoretical and mythological realms of megalith alignments. Many such formations have been thought of as having specific relationships to the solstices or equinoxes. There is the inference, then, of something universal in the act of forming the circle, something that implies a spiritual exploration of the natural. The multitude of references embodied by *Sympathetic Circle* links the piece with its twin of original stones through time and space; it proposes that something mystical, something beyond the ordinary, might be accessed through a considered, reverential engagement with the natural world.

A cast of a thing, like a photograph, has a slippery and uncanny relationship with the thing from which it is taken. In *Power Things*, Palonen heightens this strangeness by presenting her casts as objects of some mystical power – resin talismans carefully bound in ribbon, a perfect circle formed by diminutive synthetic menhirs. But it is primarily through the ritual of collection and return that Palonen *activates* the power of these artificial stand-ins. By documenting so painstakingly the location of each piece that she has cast in this exhibition, and subsequently returning it there, Palonen complicates the relationship between cast and original further and ties the replica firmly to place. The casts, then, not only echo the *form* of their originals, but also embody a kind of geographic index. While each synthetic replica is a fragment of the world made strange and wondrous, it is also a portal to, and a memory of, a location somewhere in the world.

Mitchel Brannan

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