

*Kate Newby's Phenomena*

Alex Bacon

November 2022

The English word “phenomenon” comes from the Greek “phaínesthai,” meaning “to appear, to become visible.” This is what Kate Newby’s work does, both with regard to the sense it has of being a natural outgrowth of its site, and how it can in turn make that site visible and thus shape our understanding of it. Art historically, while related to land art of the 1960s and ‘70s, Newby’s work operates less in the legacy of Walter de Maria filling the gallery with dirt, or Robert Smithson or Michael Heizer forcing nature to assume the forms they impose on it, and more in line with the sand and clay “dwellings” of Charles Simonds.

Small, unassuming, and perched discretely and ephemerally in the existing interstices of public urban sites, Simonds’s dwellings suggest the archaeological sites of a lost civilization that has been revealed after millennia by the actions of sand and wind. Simonds’s works, like Newby’s, are often eventually subsumed back into the environment. Incidentally several entities that feature prominently in Simonds’s dwellings are also often involved in Newby’s work. Sand as the base material of the glass she often uses, clay as a type of matter both artists favor for its simultaneous strength and malleability, and wind as the activity that moves through the holes she often introduces into spaces, and which generates some of the marks that occur in her etchings.

Newby’s work introduces into the space in which it is installed a set of conditions, almost meteorological in nature, that give rise to effulgences of ceramic, glass and bronze, among other materials. The passivity of the exhibition space is not merely laid visible, it is somewhat overwritten as it becomes activated, becoming imaginatively a conduit for the actions that gave rise to these works, and which they set in motion within it.

A series of prints were produced through just such kinds of forces. Newby left out copper etching plates in parts of the landscape near her home in Floresville, Texas. The aleatory markings that accumulated on them were the result of the chance encounter of the elements and, most especially, by the scratching, prodding and other forms of manipulation these wax covered plates were subjected to by the animals that happened across them. These marks are not legible as such to us when we see the final print made from the weathered plate. Indeed, the more activity that has occurred, the less readable they are, since the marks exist as removals of the wax, and so the more that happens to them the less wax is left on the plate. Encountering these prints in the gallery, even if we do not know the source of the marks, we still get the sense of them as displaying the traces of something other than the deliberate actions of a human hand. They are evident as recordings, as simultaneously clear and mysterious, abstract and representational, as a weather pattern.

Newby often establishes a meteorological context for her installations by subtly, but definitively, altering the architecture of the exhibition space. One such gesture that appears regularly in her practice is to replace certain windows with blown glass with holes that allow the air inside and outside the gallery to mix, establishing a link between them. In this exhibition there is also a door made with the storied Atelier Loire workshop in Paris. It features a pane of glass that has been colored a vibrant deep yellow via a medieval technique called *jaune d’argent*, which produces a signature glowing gold color as metallic salts change during the firing process.

Additionally, it has a variegated topography that is the result of Newby manipulating the gypsum base used to cast the glass with body parts like her hands, knees and elbows. These marks are, like those in the prints, thus not necessarily directly legible, and yet are clearly bodily indexes, thus bringing into play a corporeal dimension to something we typically look through rather than experience haptically.

Newby tactfully uses the skills of master craftspeople as a platform or situation that she can insert herself within, taking on the role of a collaborator who subtly but respectfully subverts the usual endresults of such processes via quick thinking and improvisation during the act of making. Ceramic tiles fired by master ceramicist Peter Wood and embedded with melted down discarded glass that Newby collected on the streets of London form a mural on the back wall of the gallery. A regular activity of Newby's, she roams the streets local to the site of an exhibition, often enlisting collaborators to search for this ubiquitous, but often overlooked category of detritus. She melts the assembled material, returning the glass to its original state, reminding us of the malleability fundamental to this fired form of sand. We realize that in fact heat is the method most often utilized by Newby to fabricate her work: the firing that produces glass, for example, and how it is in turn fired again to form it into the shapes she desires, as well as the heat that gives rise to the *jaune d'argent* glass coloration process. Not to mention the firing of the clay to make her tiles; and the heat involved in the lost wax process that generates her bronze rope sculptures. Newby's work thus links the alchemical and the geological reminding us both of the history and actions of the earth, as well as how people have harnessed it over millennia to fashion beautiful and meaningful objects.

Newby extends her engagement with the architecture of the space by removing one of the gallery's cement floor tiles and replacing it with a dense grid of her ceramic ones. They erupt through the floor, just as they expand across the wall behind it like a kind of moss. Both ceramic and glass tile interventions conspire to subvert the sterility of the white cube with their warm, crystalline beauty. Indeed, much of the work in the exhibition is imbued with a soft yellow glow that permeates the air around them, even as it alters the structure of the architecture as well.

The tile murals are complimented by an installation in the back of the ground floor of the gallery of suspended cast bronze rope fragments. The lost wax casting process both vitrifies the plastic climbing rope that Newby uses as the subject of this work and transforms it into a more organic entity. Gone is the industrially made, artificial rope and in its place is a green ghost of its form which—unlike the plastic of the rope—is subject to patination with handling, the conditions it is in, and the vagaries of time. A strong, unchanging entity used to support bodies and buildings thus becomes a contingent material that engages with, and is acted upon, by its surroundings.

Taking together Newby's different interventions, we find that she has addressed many of the essential architectural elements of a built space: its floors, walls, windows and doors. Like the natural forces that shape the materials and making of her work, the impact of her sculpture has within such human-made conditions is simultaneously forceful and quiet. In this sense it is a phenomenon, appearing and making not only itself visible, but in the process the space itself appears in a new way as well. Ways that suggest how the synthetic and the natural might convene more symbiotically.