
TYLER BRIGHT HILTON is a Toronto-based visual artist who works with drawing and printmaking, fusing multiple pictorial languages in narratives that make a consistent attempt to make the inner, subjective conditions of the subject transparent for the viewer. Hilton received an MFA from the Chelsea College of Fine Arts in London, UK, where his work was included in New Contemporaries and the Liverpool Biennale. His work is held in The Art Gallery of Ontario, The Montreal Museum of Fine Art and the Archive of Modern Conflict.

SYLVIA MATAS is an interdisciplinary artist from Winnipeg. She received her MFA from the Chelsea College of Art and Design in London, England. Her work has been exhibited at the Maclaren Art Centre (Barrie, ON), The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Plug In ICA (Winnipeg, MB), Truck Contemporary Art (Calgary, AB), Útúrdúr (Reykjavík), the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, and Mercer Union (Toronto).

SYLVIA, FROM HERE

BY TYLER BRIGHT HILTON

The short-sighted cannot love mountains as the long-sighted do.

—Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*

I

Sylvia Matas and I met in England in 2008 as MFA students at the Chelsea College of Arts. I have followed her work closely since then, as a friend and fan.

When I was first introduced to Sylvia's art practice I was troubled by it; I couldn't understand what it was in her often very minimal work that made it feel so full and strong. Years have passed, and now I think that this strength comes from Sylvia's genuine belief in, and need for, the forum that her work creates to address questions she is truly concerned with. Her work is animated by this need, so that when we encounter it, we are encountering, in a real sense, Sylvia herself. I recognize that this sounds like I'm making the claim that the work is therefore in some sense magical. What else should I call it?

Sylvia's work seems to me to have nothing to do with ethical issues and little to no interest in aesthetic or contemporary debates. Her work asks what it means to be a sentient, mortal being on a planet moving in space. It is magical because this question is posed with such affectless, simple materials: short, soundless videos that consist of pans or stills and a few fragmentary sentences, embossed text on cards, bookworks that consist of spare and unattributed diagrams and line drawings, lists of sounds and weather reports. Maybe all good art transfigures more or less base materials into something of great value. That's alchemy right? Alchemy is magic.

II

Another thing about magic and art is the relationship of faith. Is there an indexical relationship between the quality of artist and the sincerity of their relationship to their subject? I think so. How in love with light do you have to be to make interpreting it your life's work? You must be James Turrell. You must buy a crater and invite the people to come see your light-hole in the desert.

So far as we know for sure, the only beings really capable of reflecting on the universe are humans, but in practice this seems to be a pretty rare activity. The thoughts that result in doing so are so humbling that it's a lot of work just to process them, and this makes it hard to integrate into our lives in any practical way. What's weird is that Sylvia actually does earnestly seem preoccupied in a day-to-day way with these questions.

Sylvia is an artist, not a scientist, so however informed by research her work may be, her concerns are ultimately more poetic than intellectual. When her work considers the movement of celestial bodies, the questions this raises for her are both emotive and practical. In her own writing on *The moon is moving away from Earth at a rate of about 4cm per year*, a piece from 2010, she provides some context that I think can function as a key to unlock a lot of her work. She asks "*How different do we feel from those who lived before us, now that we know the universe is infinite and expanding?*"¹ To me, this is evidence of a kind of philosophical pragmatism in the face of awe-inspiring information brought to us by scientists. It says, in effect, 'thank you for telling me, now what am I to do with these ideas?'

III

Sylvia explained that it was tiring, hard work making her more labor-intensive *Views of the Moon* series of drawings, which use directional strokes to imply a kind of thrust, or gravitational pull emanating from/going to objects and the space around them—a house, a window, beams of light, gaps between walls. This has made me consider how boredom comes into play with her work. Is meditation boring for a serious meditator? Is boredom even relevant? Is this process work or conceptual work? I think you'd have to call it labour-intensive conceptual art. I think with this type the artist could get really bored while they are working and it wouldn't matter qualitatively to the outcome in the least. Probably pilots get bored flying, but they still take us vast distances.

One of the more mysterious qualities of Sylvia's work, whether it's a drawing or a book or a

video, is the feeling of sound that her work implies. It always feels like there's an ambient rushing, like the sound of a distant waterfall. How does she do that? This seems to be an extraordinarily rare gift. I can't think of any other art that prompts this feeling in me.

IV

Popularly speaking, one of the things I think we mean when we call something poetic is that it possesses economy of means, providing a succinct marriage of feeling and articulation. One of the goals seems to be to add clarity to the reader's thoughts and feelings, so that they come away with a sense of communion, ennobled by the process.

If Sylvia's art is poetry, is it Goth poetry? Sylvia herself is slightly Goth. She's almost always dressed entirely in black and her hair is black. She's pretty pale too, but hey, that's Winnipeg right? In the literary sense, the work definitely feels pretty Gothic. A lot of it seems to hover in a space of dread, presenting maddening enigmas in a fairly suspenseful way. There's a kind of alienation, and a kind of horror. Also, a lot of the work seems to be describing some cosmological event, say, a meteorite crash, but from the perspective of science fiction, as if the narrator is so stupefied by a natural event that it could only be understood through the lens of the supernatural.

Still, I don't really think her work is Goth, because there's no romance. The tone is usually somewhere between flat or awed. In this way, at least, it's more Hippy than Goth. Uncertainty is central, and everything is always in the process of dissolving and reforming, floating up and then back down. Something is about to happen and has already happened; something is about to become big and on its way to becoming part of something else, which will become small again. It's like a lava lamp.

We are meant to trip out on lava lamps in the same passive way we absorb our own dreams. Like dreams, Sylvia's work combines extreme specificity with generality. In her videos the details of the images and text seem urgent, but the viewer/reader is never provided with enough context to securely orient themselves.

We toggle from location to location and there is a logical sense of connection between those spaces but the rationale of that connection is invisible, like buried wires. The photographic images present a point of view that is chilly, straight-on, as indifferent to aesthetics as a mugshot, while the narratives seem a little out of control and scary. What began as shrubbery in front of a house has now swallowed the house. There is evidence of people being around, somewhere, but they are never clearly depicted; groups of people are one mass, forming and dissolving, pointing at things, but never engaging with the narrator.

V

The voice behind all of this work is quiet, but forceful. It insists, by making any other approach to the work awkward and unrewarding, on a combination of astonishment and humility on the part of the viewer. It demands that we reckon with the fact that everything we perceive is filtered through our own dubious brain matter. And it does all this with so little. In this way I think Sylvia's work encourages a heightened sensitivity on the part of the audience, and I'm grateful for it.

1. Artist's website, www.sylviamatas.com