

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013



ART CLUB: ANNA BETBEZE AT KATE WERBLE GALLERY

GUY FORGET

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Installation view of Anna Betbeze, Moss Garden. L to R: "Hoarfrost" and "Nightshade", both 2011.
Image courtesy of Kate Werble Gallery.

It's been a rough couple weeks, with all the anticipation and all — but Art Club is finally here. Time to talk about Anna Betbeze's Moss Garden at Kate Werble. I came away from the show with a few things on my mind, and I suspect others did too.

Since this is Art Club, I think there is a communal implication, like in a book club, where we edify each other with our differing opinions. It's like multiculturalism. And while I don't actually ever ask myself these questions, it eventually boils down to this, one way or another, assuming the work(s) are worth thinking about. Three Questions:

Does it look good?
Is it conceptually interesting?
Would I want to live with it?

Although these look like "yes" or "no" questions, they're not, and they're not straightforward at all. For example, what does it mean for something to "look good"? That said, here are a few thoughts about Betbeze's six works that comprise Moss Garden.

- a. Moss Garden needs to be seen in person. It's basically impossible to appreciate the tactile quality of the pieces from images alone.
- b. As objects, there are obvious things going on with Betbeze's work, the most obvious being that they were once a unified ground (flokati rugs). The works in Moss Garden are

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arrived at by adding and subtracting elements to the ground, using a variety of means, including pigments, cutting, burning.

c. Before I saw the show I had thought they might have a grungy appearance, but they don't, despite the destructive elements in their creation (including the selectively burning of sections). They are in fact very "clean". Pleasing to look at.

d. I liked the back room better. I had the most trouble with *Lacuna* (all works from 2011). *Lacuna*, from the front room, is one of the largest works in the show, and was unique in that so much of the original ground was removed. There is a large section removed from the center, leaving a lot of negative space, which unfortunately reminds me of a rabbit head. Due to the extent of what has been cut out (I would estimate that roughly 50% of *Lacuna* is negative space), I think it would look different, more at home, in a larger space, against a larger wall, where the scale of the piece could be better accommodated and comprehended. Scale and size are two different things.

e. These works are somewhere between painting and sculpture. Their physical presence is critical to what they are. In her *New York Times* review, Karen Rosenberg mostly interprets Betbeze's work as a continuance and exploration of art historical developments in abstract painting, citing Helen Frankenthaler and Lucio Fontana, among others, which are certainly useful comparisons. Although Rosenberg does consider the works' materiality, I don't think their materiality should be a secondary element of interpretation, as an aside to their painterly qualities. I thought of El Anatsui – but where he creates unified large-scale abstractions by accruing smaller, preexisting elements, Betbeze removes and alters an already unified (and preexisting) element. This might sound like opposites but I think they are related.

f. All the works in Moss Garden are sculptural (they also partially rest on the floor), and I think the tactile quality of the material is inherently complex, more so by Betbeze's interventions (cutting, burning, dyeing, etc.).

g. My favorites are the two monochromes, *Hoarfrost* and *Nightshade*, and *Moss*, a multicolored piece. *Moss* is the least altered, in terms of actual ground removed. These are my favorites as they are the most unified, visually (the first two in color, the latter in "field") — unified in contrast to the complexity of the works' materiality, both inherent and as a result of Betbeze's myriad interventions. The aggregate processes acted on these three works can be appreciated more easily (to their benefit) because of the more fundamental visual unity (relative to the other works).

h. Michel Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" (1967). This writing (formulated as a lecture) was mentioned in the press release as a basis for the name of the show, "Moss Garden". Rosenberg, the *NYT* critic, was happy, felt that it was "fortunate," that Moss Garden didn't appear overtly serious or theoretical, which I thought was strange, especially since, by my reading, Foucault's lecture is actually a beautiful, hopeful piece. And the section on gardens is hardly burdened by theory. The lecture is on what Foucault calls "heterotopias," places where cultural relations are represented in real spaces (in contrast to unrealizable utopias); variously exclusive spaces where a society's culture is in some way reflected. These heterotopias take on different forms for different cultures and in different instances. According to Foucault, one of the first forms of heterotopia is the garden. He writes:

We must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four

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parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and water fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm. As for carpets, they were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space). The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity (our modern zoological gardens spring from that source).



Anna Betbeze, "Second Ocean", 2011, wool, acid dyes, watercolor, 96 x 52 in.
Image courtesy of Kate Werble Gallery.

It's interesting that the two pieces that I had most difficulty with have the most to gain from this passage. *Lacuna*, with its void as the center of the world — a nothingness? — and *Second Ocean*, where Betbeze has cut out this "umbilicus" only to replace it, altered.

These are discussion points and not "art criticism." Would love to hear viewer thoughts.

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