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'Kate Tarrat Cross at AVA

by Michael Chandler

Traditionally, painting involves the representation of a subject. Although this notion has changed drastically in the last century, there still seems to be a dichotomy between the depiction of a subject and that which is more abstract. Kate Tarrat Cross' work at the AVA seems to sit somewhere inbetween these two modes. Her paintings are of shadows, which while they are actual things, are at the same time nothing. Shadows are ephemeral, always morphing and the result of something 'greater' - they are informed by something else. Shadows can never be independent. It is this overlooked twilight zone of nothingness that Tarrat Cross explores in her exhibition.

Tarrat Cross' exhibition is made up of a series of pictures and an installation. I found the series of six paintings most potent. They are executed in two tones and depict the changes of a shadow through a morning. Strangely, the shadow seems to get elongated towards midday instead of smaller. Nevertheless, the shadow in question is that which one can only assume to be the artist herself. The shadow that is painted is seemingly of a person beside what appears to be an easel. It is essentially a portrait of an artist - perhaps a self-portrait of Tarrat Cross herself.

Creating a portrait through a shadow is an interesting take on an old genre. We don't see the sitter, but we see them in relation to the shadow; after all a shadow cannot exist without being directly connected to its source. The shadows, as honest as they are, tell us very little about the body that they are attached to. The shadows thus represent very little else than an artist's relationship to light - a very important factor in any artist's work. Light can affect the shape and colour of an object - as it does in Tarrat Cross' canvases.

This relationship between artist and light becomes even more complex when one notices their own shadow merging with the canvas that they are looking at. The lighting in the space allows for this to happen on a few of the works. And if one stands at an exact point in relation to the work, the painted shadow appears as if it stems from the viewer. Tarrat subtly draws the viewer into her works and morphs viewer and art together.

I found it interesting to see how the artist had physically painted her canvases. Like light touching a surface, Tarrat Cross too had no direct physical relationship with her canvas. Using a spray-painting technique, Tarrat Cross never touched her canvases while painting. The paint spray acted like light particles and adhered themselves to where there was no obstacle. I enjoyed this mimetic relationship between subject and medium.

Shadows are essentially the result of something interrupting a source of light. This absence of light is what creates the shadow. Shadows have been used throughout history to describe that which is unknown and feared. One cannot look at Tarrat Cross' work without thinking of the associations that come with shadows. It is easy to start analyzing her work in depth through psychology and the shadow metaphor. The lengthening shadows could act as a symbol of darkness encroaching. Less light can lead to a 'greater self', etc. While I don't think that these are inaccurate, I do believe that there is enough self-evident information imbued in her work to allow one to work with the simple actualities located in the pictures.

The idea of shadows as sources of imagery are further explored through the unusually-located installation. Wedged into a corner between two of her canvases, this comprises a video projected onto a mosquito net and two white curtains. The video is silent and contains flashing, still images of Haiti. These images, Tarrat Cross explains, are not of the tropical paradise as often romanticised of Haiti, but of things which lead her to describe Haiti as 'hellish'. The very personal experiences which she experienced and captured on film while in Haiti, contrast sharply with the normally calm, soothing atmosphere of a bedroom. This leaves the viewer feeling slightly disturbed. Tarrat Cross explains that the installation was inspired by a bout of illness which left her feverish in bed which one can begin to feel after looking at the installation for some time.

I couldn't understand why the installation was located between the series of paintings. I thought that the installation would have worked a lot more effectively if it were located in the bedroom-like space off the stairs. The darkness of the room would have allowed the actual video to be more distinct, as opposed to washed out and diluted as it was in the

main room.

I found that the lighting in the exhibition was clumsy. One would expect that in an exhibition that deals with shadows, the lighting would have been carefully planned. In some places, the spot lights shine behind the viewer, encouraging them to think about their presence in relation to the work. But with others the spot lights shine just off the canvas, suggesting that they are still illuminating the space where a previous work was hanging. I also found the amount of natural light streaming in through the windows washed out the video piece and compromised its potency.

Tarrat Cross' exhibition is a thoughtful series of pictures, which play with our understandings of art. She makes commentary simultaneously on art, the artist, the viewer through several simple, almost identical pictures. It is wonderful to find such a dialogue of ideas stemming from such a neat and clear exhibition.

Opens: August 28

Closes: September 7

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