

Nika Neelova: Memories of Now

The obvious point of entry to Nika Neelova's world is through its atmosphere. 'Monuments' consists of three brooding installations: stairs, with spear-like railings, which threaten to fall onto us in the process of going nowhere; what looks like an elevated and useless section of railway acting as a burnt gallows, from which coils of charred rope descend; and the ash from that burnt timber spread across four flags, to deny them their usual function of symbolizing power. We're in a series of fragmented places, linked by darkly evocative materials and by the sense that they could soon tip into an end.

But there's beauty here in the romantic sublime, which nineteenth century artists found in ruins, and in the detailing of the distress: the understructure of geometrical forms covered by baroque flourishes, the painstaking fabrication - those ropes are cast from twists of paper, the stairs waxed to the max, that ash is sewn into patterns... All this gives a sense of glories past, for sure, but a feeling too that there's something subtler to be engaged with here than a theatre of loss. So what is that other way in?

Artists are often inspired by their childhood experiences and seek to revisit them in some way. Proust provides the great literary example, while one of the purest parallels in contemporary art is the hyper-realized tableaux of Martin Honert. Both seek, however hopelessly, to capture things as they were. Nika Neelova may start from a related desire, but her strategy differs fundamentally: she seeks to capture - from memory alone - how those scenes from the past might look now, years later: to catch, if you will, the memory of now.

It's a difficult task. Not only - as in Proust and Honert - might the fallibility and subjectivity of memory distort that past reality, it's also a speculative matter to guess to what extent time will have affected the remembered places, and how that might have manifested itself. Add the constraints posed by Neelova's method, which is to construct these imagined contemporary ruins by collaging together degraded elements from other places, and it is apparent that she is making a point of the impossibility of being 'right' in any objective sense. Her desire to remake the track from past to present is balanced by her building into the very nature of her work the practical impossibility of going back.

At 24, Neelova may seem a little young to be driven by such concerns, but they make sense in the context of her itinerant life to date: born in Russia, she lived in France from five to ten years old, returned to Russia until she was 15, then studied in the Netherlands before moving to London in 2008. No wonder all homes strike her as provisional, and she hankers to recapture some sense of the places she has lost.

All of which may sound likely to lead to internally-directed and potentially impenetrable work. Neelova avoids that, though, by two means. First, she constructs those past spaces of hers out of items from other places and other pasts. Second, she's fascinated by public processes of commemoration. In essence, her works are private monuments which take on a public aspect through standing in for the anonymous mass, generating a circular movement between the public and the private.

In both respects the individual is rooted in the social, and that's what prevents Neelova slipping into self-indulgence. She shows how our collective and public pasts feed into and out of our individual and private pasts, and in that sense her spaces stand reciprocally for ours.

What's more, for all that it's time, not life, which has been lost in them, Neelova's places remain literally and metaphorically dark. Partly that's because one kind of loss inevitably bleeds into another. Partly it's because there's only way to move on from the frozen state her spaces have reached. And partly it's because they physically enact the closing off of possibilities. The staircase doesn't just reach towards space, it's blocked by the ceiling. The pseudo-railway runs into the walls of the room. The flags of ash jut out on banister poles to impede our natural path through the gallery.

A Freudian might jump on that combination of childhood, memory and blockage. The blockages could be the ego's defense mechanism, its way of resolving the conflict between the impulses of the id (who knows what the young Neelova wanted to do deep down?) and the more socially-determined beliefs of the superego (how did she think she ought to act?). Yet I don't think you have to be a Freudian to pick up the sense that darker subconscious forces may lie behind the conscious scenes...

That, perhaps, returns us to atmosphere after all, albeit one enriched by the geometry and gravity, public combinations and private elisions, degradations and blockages which go to make up Nika Neelova's memories of now.

Paul Carey-Kent: March 2011