Penelope Stewart: Apian Screen / Penelope Stewart: Apian Screen, Musée d'art de Joliette, June 3 – December 30, 2012

Natalie Olanick
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When we first experience Penelope Stewart’s sensory installation, Apian Screen, a room in the museum covered from floor to ceiling with beeswax tiles, there is a delight in the honey colours and musky odours of wax, which lead our thoughts and feelings to natural wonders. As we look closer, and stay longer in her wax environment, we see a logic being imposed onto this delectable surface, not a harsh oppositional difference but rather an intellectualization that is entwined within the wax.

There is a brazen exploration of methods, materials and language represented in Apian Screen. Stewart develops a process of creation, which combines the practical and repetitive, mundane work of domestic maintenance with her creative inquiry. Her choice of a simple wax tile (4” x 4”) becomes a significant feature of the work. She has cast thousands of them and adhered them to the walls, stacking one beside the other both horizontally and vertically. They transform the site and become the space that they occupy.

The work of Eva Hesse, her insights and reasoning of why and how she worked with repetition, is a solid foundation for reading Apian Screen. Lucy Lippard quotes Hesse: “If something is absurd it’s much more greatly exaggerated if it’s repeated. Repetition does enlarge or increase or exaggerate an idea or purpose. I guess repetition feels obsessive.”

Apian Screen is an obsessive work. We can see the delicate care that is taken to create each component of the screen and Stewart’s inventive play and attention to detail, pattern, tessellation and mirroring becomes a human honey comb of sorts. Randomness only exists in the colouration of the wax modules. Further, Stewart’s incorporation of common methods of fabrication for dwellings and decoration segue into the relief imagery that appears like a wax map or topography. The surface reveals a series of linear forms that connect together to create larger geometric shapes. Her topography begins with a cluster of small buildings and radiating roadways, connecting one to the other. This

compelling but eventually it is the scent that undermines the beauty and the experience, first through seduction and then through suffocation. Like moths to a flame, we enter the space again and again reliving the experience. The room toys with us, as we feel drawn to it by its colour, its smooth skin-like surface, its topography, its volume and its intriguing pattern. Touching the relief, following the pattern, where does it connect? Where does it repeat? Is it this visceral language that asks the question… whose Utopia? "Paradise for one could be hell for another."

The combination of form and materials demonstrates a personal interpretation of protection and carries with it a feeling of comfort, a secure place for rumination with no fixed goal.

In Apian Screen, we see a practical definition for the living conditions of our general population become a personal passion. The detailed labour that is required to create the work is Stewart’s language, which aptly describes exploration and consolation. We explore our own surprise evoked from Stewart’s particular fusion of nature and culture.

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Natalie OLANICK is an artist, writer and part-time curator. She teaches at Dawson College and is on the Board of Articule. She has shown her work in various galleries and museums in Canada and the United States. Her writings have been published in Ciel Variable, Etc, Lola.

NOTES

Penelope STEWART, Apian Screen, 2012. Installation. Photo: courtesy the artist and Musée d’art de Joliette.