

Body Doubles: On Eleanor Bartlett's Tar Paintings, and other works

Eleanor Bartlett's works are built up in successive layers, of tar, metal paint, or wax, depending on the series. These works are deeply eloquent, yet any purely figurative suggestion one might read into them would hardly do them justice. The artist's works do speak; they just don't do it through depiction. It is the materials that provide the parameters of Bartlett's artistic practice, and her poetry lies in how she deals with them.

Every medium Bartlett chooses to work with calls for a different scale and approach. She elaborates specific methods of working, each time setting out the circumstances for a robust conversation, between herself and the chosen substance. And she knows her materials intimately, with a knowledge that grows through doing. This embodied practice is precise, unrepeatable, and intriguing: Bartlett works on her paintings with a dogged persistence, until they reach a state that is poised between stillness and momentum. She says she could work on them forever – and occasionally she does, by removing a layer or adding a new one, several years later: a finished painting then, for Bartlett, is one that abides in flux. There is inherent tension, but it is infused with a graceful tentativeness that touches our humanity.

The artist's 2017 solo-exhibition in the South Cloisters at Salisbury Cathedral consisted of a site-specific installation. A row of snow-white works, wax slabs, bearing smaller rectangular surfaces, onto which successive layers of candle wax had been poured, had an alabaster transparency that seemed to glow from within. They had something of the memorial stones set into that cathedral's walls, from which time had erased the letters. Devoid of names or words, the white slabs seemed to become memorials to us all, with past, present and future melded into one. With time blurred into a continuum, it made the cloisters emblematic of a more figurative, human passage, of successive generations. There were also two monumental panels, tall and black with tar that stood like luscious, yet forbidding optical doorways, vertical answers to the slabs beside them on the floor.

In the tar paintings, there is a similar sense of timelessness. Layers of metal paint and tar have forms that adhere to them, in a mass of sticky bitumen. As a material, tar, bitumen, or pitch as it is also known, is incredibly slow to flow. The pitch drop experiment at the University of Queensland in Brisbane has been running since 1927. It released its ninth drop not so long ago. Bitumen is a bit of a physical contradiction: it has viscoelastic properties, giving it a physical memory. It has a tendency to pull back together, recovering its shape after a tension has been applied, yet it is also viscous: it flows, or, to use the more scientific term, it creeps. Bitumen is sticky to handle. It polymerizes, yet never fully sets. The tar adds a peculiar resistance to any artistic decision Bartlett makes.

In the works you can sense a force that is distinctly physical: memory sits deep in these layers, with the artist's successive gestures and decisions caught, dried and set in the material's polymerization. Each tar painting is its own graphic iteration, a dark or light form, that converses with the canvas' edges. Despite the contrast between the light metal paint - that sometimes turns creamy, with the tar beneath leaching through, like saps from a tree seeping through snow - and the rich brown tar, negative space is all but non-existent: every millimetre of the works is invested with material presence. Shown together, these paintings speak with each other, too. One might imagine how such a painting could leave an after-image – a temporal, almost musical memory - that becomes the frame through which to see the next one; a walk through the gallery in the other direction would then reverse the experience.

Maybe we do discern in them a canoe slowly veering off, a flower folding open, or a steep cliff that teeters near an edge. A moon scratched out, white in white, or two black crescents as its reverse, kissing each other, slightly off-centre, across a diptych, striving to meet.

I imagine Bartlett makes her work in a state of deep concentration, veering on trance, in a focus that does not tolerate rational projection. I daresay the forms are dictated by the material. She doesn't work with premeditated, depictive intentions, yet the process couldn't be more specific: you have to get your hand in and listen. This creative work takes place at the point where an artist's intentions meet a material's allowances and limitations.

Any painting, beyond itself, also always is a window through which to look at (the history of) the painted medium. The square forms might recall works from the height of abstraction, the black square by Malevich (the version shown at the Whitechapel gallery in 2015 wasn't that square either.¹) And an incision to a deeper layer, unlike Lucio Fontana's *Concetti Spaziali*, reveals no void, just material exuberance.

The tar paintings evoke work that was made at the height of modernism, yet they also have an urgency that is utterly fresh and compelling today; they exist on their own terms. I am reminded of a tree I saw standing in the courtyard of the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation in Venice last summer. There was sap coming from its bark that had set in dark translucent beads in the sun. Its presence easily matched that of the artworks in the museum, yet it occupied its own time span, from ancient times to the present. As objects, Bartlett's tar paintings are visual interpellations, like glyphs that question the state of reality, since they embody so many contradictions: layers of tar on paint and of paint on tar each tell their own stories: they bear witness to the strokes that made them. Bartlett's *pentimenti* are not erased, but kept as *bas-reliefs* that are taken along as parameters into the next layer.

What makes Eleanor Bartlett's practice so extraordinary is how the materials she chooses offer historical and cultural metaphors that are tangled up with their physical properties. They trigger countless tactile associations: a rich, dark and velvety absorption, a glossy reflection, the tack of freshly laid tarmac road. And while Bartlett stops short of investing any of her works with figurative depictions, and does not give her works overtly narrative titles, these materials she chooses offer an excess of narrative implications of their own. Wax and tar are steeped in countless primordial, even occult associations.

Bitumen has excellent waterproofing qualities. Once used as mortar for the bricks of Babel, it is still used to caulk boats and protect houses from the elements today. Historically, it was used as an adhesive to attach gemstones to jewellery and medicine. It was the first petrochemical product exploited by man, and for centuries it was a sought-after commodity. Those who first discovered the Egyptian tombs initially presumed the deceased were embalmed with *mum*, the Persian word for wax but also for bitumen, giving mummies their name. Bitumen² began to be widely used in embalming of the dead during the Ptolemaic and Greco-Roman periods, when the Egyptians' funerary beliefs changed: they would make the deceased as dark as possible, as a symbol of regeneration, like the fertile clay from the bottom of the Nile that the yearly floods deposited on its banks. The Egyptians of this period also wished to emulate the immortal god Osiris who was

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/18/adventures-of-the-black-square-review-whitechapel-abstract-art-that-aimed-to-change-the-world>

<http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/adventures-of-the-black-square/>

² [K. A. Clark, S. Ikram, and R. P. Evershed](#)

The significance of petroleum bitumen in ancient Egyptian mummies,

[Philos Trans A Math Phys Eng Sci.](#) 2016 Oct 28; 374(2079): 20160229.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5031647/> consulted January 4th, 2018

often depicted as having dark skin: they believed he would use two fingers to help the deceased's spirit climb up his ladder, into the Elysian Fields, the realm of the afterlife. Wax tablets were one of the earliest writing surfaces, in which letters could be incised, then melted, to receive new inscriptions. In Egyptian tombs, wax effigies known as Ushabti, or Shabtis, were used as body doubles for the deceased, to carry out any manual labour for them, that they might have to do in the afterlife. These figures would do the work for them. Wax figurines would be used to cast spells, good or evil, and waxen limbs have been used as ex-votos to petition for miracles of healing. In the history of painting, encaustic, a type of wax, is one of the most stable and enduring varieties of paint known to mankind: pigments suspended in it maintain their brilliance over centuries, better than they do when they are suspended in oil paint.

Embodied knowledge and experience built up through doing is so very at odds with the mass-dissemination of digital images via the internet. This may be part of the urgency of Eleanor Bartlett's approach: it is impossible to appreciate it without physical engagement. In order to be seen, properly, it needs your physical presence. It cannot be understood or experienced remotely, from the flatlands of screens and endless visual duplication. The works evoke a sense of mourning, a singing presence that affects us like dirges. And now and then a brown splat transgresses into the white, to disrupt these question marks of paintings.

Seeing them reveals something subtler than a camera could record: this is true for many art works. In Eleanor Bartlett's practice however, this condition of seeing them *in the flesh*, of being there, is extreme. They do the work for us and draw us back to the authentic realm of the body, and the physical world.

Kate Christina Mayne
Antwerp, January 2018

Kate Christina Mayne (UK, BE) is a writer and artist based in Antwerp, Belgium.