

16 november to 5 january 2008

martin smith

Seeing Martin Smith's new work, the first pieces he has made for the wall, I was reminded of the cussed way that the American artist Sol Lewitt used to describe parts of his oeuvre. He made drawings, paintings, prints and 'wall drawings' - extraordinary lattices of geometric forms interlaced across walls, floors and even buildings. But when he was asked to describe his work in three dimensions he demurred at the word 'sculpture' and called them 'structures'. 'Sculpture' was too facile a term for him. There are problems of naming that happen when something new happens. It is the problem of avoidance of cliché, avoidance of the easy iteration of accepted tropes of description. It is the acceptance of the fact that inadequate naming, inadequate description, consigns work to a sort of taupe wilderness. Sol Lewitt's determination to identify the newness of what he was doing finds great correspondence with Martin Smith's. For this new work is really new.

These are extraordinary pieces. They are - amongst other things - structures, a sort of painting with vessels, a sort of drawing with shadows, a meditation on seriality, a minimalist taking on the Baroque and a ceramicist's version of architectural blueprints. There are two installations in the exhibition. The first, *Triptych in Four Parts*, is an installation of four structures made from a brick-clay each with a shallow elliptical indentation covered in an aluminium foil. These four pieces hang next to each other with a 20mm gap between them. The second installation *Serial Dialogue in Fifteen Parts* consists of a grid of fifteen pieces made from a buff clay 'the colour of houses in the Fens'. Each of these pieces is also separated from its neighbour by the same small gap. The interior of these, a matrix of raised parallel lines, is painstakingly covered with platinum foil. Both of the installations were conceived to be placed on the wall around head height and a bit like Anne Truitt's discrete coloured monoliths of the 1960's which had just the faintest shadow gap, leaving them to float above the ground, these installations float slightly off the wall. Both of the installations work with the idea of seriality: how seemingly similar works when placed close together become dialogic. They have moved away from 'the idea of a centre or a focus toward which forms point or build' as Krauss wrote of Carl Andre, towards the idea of all of the serial parts of the installation creating the meaning.

In many ways to talk of Smith's work as cerebral is, well, a no-brainer: it is highly considered, precise and architectonic. But to think of these qualities as in some way antithetical to passion is plainly wrong-headed. Of course, Smith is passionate about the minute changes present in his work. There is the change in the texture, for instance - the way that the edges move from the open textured roughness of the clay surface into the precise smoothness of the ellipse. Or the almost vestigial ghosting of the squares of platinum leaf in the well of the ellipse. But there is passion behind this whole work, not just in the details. Sometimes it is that very tension between seeming quietness and intense passion that is most effective. In a 1994 review in *Art in America*, Robert Kushner wrote of the American painter Robert Mangold that "underneath the composure of their execution, there is an almost romantic vividness of experience. The contrast of this veiled undercurrent and the Apollonian restraint of the presentation make these new paintings both powerful and poignant."

There is power and poignancy in these pieces: the placing of the running lines that intersect across the whole of *Serial Dialogue in Fifteen Parts* were not worked out as some elaborate geometric algorithm, but were placed intuitively in response to the way in which light was falling in the studio that day. Indeed Smith mentions his studio as an active force in the new work and it is certainly possible to see how this tough industrial space, stripped back to bare walls and metal framed windows, with its spare proportions could make the idea of working with architecture so palpable. It is as if the studio is a kind of lens in which certain aspects of his work have come into focus. It is not that Martin Smith has not been interested in architecture before: it is a long time since his *Borromini Cloister Pieces* took on the idea of the spaces and interstices of mannerist or baroque buildings in Italy. But the difference between seeing objects on a plinth or on the ground - as in his series *Wavelength*, made for the huge curving vitrine in Tate St Ives in 2001, and these new works is immense. What is new about these works is that they look at how an installation works with architecture, how it becomes temporal, how it changes in light, how it changes as you move towards it and away from it. These works do what sculpture - or 'structure' should do: they alter the space in which you are. They take on the architecture: they are sculpture on the expanded field.