



memory
landscape

aneta
regel

an essay to
accompany the
exhibition :
Memory Work by
Tanya Harrod

SARAH MYERSCOUGH GALLERY

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During the days when pandemic restrictions imposed by the Government kept us isolated, Aneta Regel found vivid memories floated up. She worked more slowly when London was in lockdown, using less glaze on her hand-built stoneware constructions. She was reflecting on landscape and recollections of home. It was a good moment of fecund and exhilarating recall. Ideas went back and forth as Regel thought back to her time as a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk where from 1996 until 2000 she studied sculpture. Together we look at a photograph of an early work called Nest. Stones are arranged on a piece of marble, caught in a pattern as if by a swirl of water. Then there is a black and white photograph of Regel as a student, kneeling, working on a relief sculpture. It is a scree of stone shards that gradually diminish in size from top to bottom, its texture recalling radical Polish tapestry of the early 1960s by figures like Magdalena Abanackowicz, Wojciech Sadley and Ann Śledziowska. Regel is thinking of bringing these early works over to London.

Although Regel was born in Silesia in 1976, her world of memory begins in the northern Polish port of Gdynia. This was where her family moved when she was an infant and where her father worked as lifeboat captain. The family lived on the southern edge of the city near the sea in a tower block. But if the block was austere concrete with institutional beige paint, once the windows were opened there was the scent and the energy of the forest. It was a Le Corbusian dream of sylvan modernism, a childhood in nature, dominated by swimming, by horses and, above all, by the forest. She was living out and part of another connected dream. Until 1989 Poland was a communist country and Regel was already thirteen when the Soviet backed

government collapsed and Poland moved to a market economy. There is no doubt that those early years offered something important, a different framework for living, now irrecoverable and, on certain levels, treasurable.

Until the age of 15 Regel practiced the piano intensely. She still thinks musically, something she shares with the sculptor Phyllida Barlow, whose work Regel greatly admires. But she abandoned music as a professional discipline and entered the Liceum Plastyczne, a state secondary school devoted to the fine arts, part of a network of similar colleges set up in post-War Poland. It was, she recalls, an amazing place, close to the highest cliff along the Polish sea coast. She had an inspiring sculpture tutor - Irene Zabrocka - who introduced Regel to clay as a modelling material. That Magdalena Abakanowicz has studied there was a source of pride for all the students. And Regel's memories of her four years at Gdańsk were similarly positive, marked by respect for her tutors, both for the rigorous education they offered and for the fact they had all been involved in rebuilding the city, left devastated after the Nazi retreat at the end of the Second World War. While she was a student, the art schools set up under communism continued to be supported and remained of a high standard.

Regel took a decisively ceramic turn when she moved to England aged twenty-five, leaving Poland, she explains, 'for love'. She was to join the famous ceramics course on the Harrow campus of the University of Westminster before going on to the Royal College of Art, again to study ceramics. In effect she carried on making sculpture that also happened to be glazed, that carried colour and was fired to high temperatures. Regel

does make vessels, especially tea bowls. An array of these battered but poised objects bring to mind Ewen Henderson's bold experiments with the genre, reminding us that tea bowls are not the special preserve of neo-orientalist potters in the Leach tradition. But they make special demands because they draw their strength from cupped hands, from human contact, human scale.

Nonetheless, in terms of studio ceramics Regel is an outlier, perhaps closest in spirit to clay's organic abstractionists - Henderson of course, as well as Gillian Lowndes and the Spaniard Claudi Casanovas. But the depth of her palette of colours looks backward to the unsettling elegance of late nineteenth century European art pottery, while paralleling the otherworldly glaze technologies of Takuro Kuwata. Kuwata began to mix rock with his clay bodies at about the same time as Regel, like her waiting on the firing for the eruption of these embedded fragments. Working at the extreme end of process-led art, Kuwata's use of rock appears essentially playful. This is hardly the case with Regel, whose understanding of geology was played out in the forest-scapes of her childhood.

Regel's recent sculptures do memory-work with living trees and inert rock. Glaciers had once peopled her Pomeranian forests, melting at the end of the Ice Age to leave a moraine of pebbles, stones and boulders. Their presence in the woods of Northern Poland gave rise to folkloric tales and legends. A rock out of place, dropped by a glacier, is known poetically by geologists as an erratic. In Regel's hands the word expands its meaning. Erratic rock inclusions that push outwards in the firing process have long been part of her work. Now, borne up by thoughts of

childhood, Regel has created forests of work, tree-like trunks and bundled branches that look damaged and yet lively. That they carry stone insertions seems in this context more highly charged. We all have been struck by the inclusion of rocks in the roots of fallen trees, revealed to us like a secret, suggesting a closeness between two worlds, mineral and vegetal.

Regel's latest tree forms are among some of her largest works to date. They bring together arboreal memories, landscapes of stone and tree. But they also reinvent themselves as images of lost souls clinging together, limbs intertwined. Some emerge as Regel's uniquely strange creatures – identifiable because they are poised on tip-toe, clay and rock anthropomorphised, advancing towards us. Their animation recalls the marble quarry men of Tuscany who, interviewed by the oral historian Giovanni Contini in the 1970s, explained that everything in nature has a soul, that marble was alive, and could feel pain.

The great ecologist of woodlands Oliver Rackham once wrote 'The most difficult task in the whole of art is to draw a tree.' For the nineteenth century polymath John Ruskin, drawing out the structures of leaves and branches was a vital exercise and his botanical studies appear to have anticipated contemporary science that asserts the intercommunicative powers of trees – encapsulated in the populist descriptor 'the Wood Wide Web'. Rackham and Ruskin notwithstanding, Regel is not putting down her ideas on paper. She is building, shaping, forming and firing. That she is undertaking a difficult task cannot be denied. But the end result is calming, taking us back to an elemental ground. Using unpredictable materials and processes, her work addresses our relationship with nature and with each other.

This is Regel's first solo exhibition in Britain, which may appear surprising given her distinction, the prizes she has been awarded, the prestigious collections that possess her work and the solo shows she had had in North America and elsewhere. It has been worth the wait. Generously, she suggests the closeness that we yearn for, and which we attempt to play out in our lives, every day, day after day.



Tanya Harrod is an art historian who writes about craft. Her book *The Last Sane Man: Michael Cardew, Modern Pots, Colonialism and the Counterculture* won the James Tait Black Prize for Biography.



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