

A Winter Experience: Penn Ponds in Winter (1989) by Andrew Sabin

A talk by Christabel Mitchell, Visitor Assistant at Leeds Art Gallery

My talk today focuses on 'Penn Ponds in Winter' by Andrew Sabin, a sculpture which was made in 1989, which is currently on display in our Natural Encounters exhibition.

What is this puzzling meringue like piece covered in barnacles and a chessboard?

Andrew Sabin, born in 1958, is an award winning British artist who was born, lives and works in London. He is known for making large-scale public works that are mostly made from galvanised steel mesh and strips. Locally, he is known for his artwork; 'Coldstones Cut', which was made in 2010, and is a monumental sculpture carved into a limestone quarry at Pateley Bridge, within the Yorkshire Dales in Nidderdale, in which visitors can freely walk around and experience.

Andrew went to art school to study sculpture in the 1980s. During this decade, young British artists were thinking about the different ways sculptures could be made and thought about. Before this he worked as a potter and made ceramics. Between 1983 and 1990 he regarded himself as an experimental object maker. He was taught by artists including; Anthony Gormley, Richard Deacon and Anish Kapoor, who were associated with the 'New British Sculpture' art movement. An important aspect of this movement for Sculpture was its physical characteristics, and rethinking methods of making and how materials were used. Here Andrew has used a variety of different materials and processes and has looked at how things compliment and contrast with each other.

At first glance it may not be obvious what this sculpture is of or about. But its suggestive shapes and patterning help to invite us in. It is quite long and flat in appearance and is 1.2m wide by 1.89m long and 34cm in height. The almost 'figure of eight' shaped sculpture has a thick white outline and its inside is decorated in a chequered pattern surface, which is disrupted with two large dinner plate sized holes. It is a mixed media piece made from cement, plastic, glazed ceramics and steel. The artwork was made to be displayed in a gallery setting, and is quite small for Andrew's standards, and is in contrast to his more recent works that are much larger in scale and displayed outside in public spaces.

Looking closer at, 'Penn Ponds in Winter' we see its quite a tactile piece and its surface combines different textures. Its outline reminds me of whipped meringue, or snow, except it's not soft. It's quite hard and almost gritty with its use of an industrial material; cement. Around this textured perimeter we have these long, almost oval-like organic shapes, quite randomly placed close together. It's not quite clear what these glossy shapes could be.

They resemble something natural, perhaps like growing mould or fungus, or even barnacles. But their colouring is black and white, like marble. And so one is left wondering: what is the function of these fluid and naturalistic forms?

On the inside of this long oval shape, is a chequered pattern like surface, of two colours, reminiscent of a chessboard, and covers a large area of the sculpture. We have brown marble stone like squares, which are paired with a translucent layer of white-ish plastic squares. You can actually see through them to a bottom layer of white cement, and notice how they are suspended by long steel nails, perhaps 15 cm long.

Almost to the middle of the sculpture are two rather big holes. The outlines of these holes are like frayed pieces of rubber, or lino, another quite industrial material. And they bend outwards like big thick eyelashes. Their curved shapes lure you inside, but lead out to the gallery floor. They're quite dominant, and their dark almost black colour contrast against the bright whiteness of this sculpture.

This artwork is currently displayed in our 'Natural Encounters' exhibition, and considers the ever more precarious human relationship with the natural environment. It explores the many ways in which artists have interpreted, approached and responded to nature, and this sculpture is amongst artworks that use our bodily experiences to connect to the environment in some way. The idea of an imagined experience or event in nature, links nicely with Andrew's piece, where the inspiration for it has come from a personal memory in childhood, and has manifested itself into this physical object. A synthetic thought has been actualised into a sculpture.

This artwork is based on Andrew's experience at Penn Ponds, a lake divided in two by a causeway, situated in Richmond Park, which is one of London's Royal Parks, that has served as inspiration for many well known artists over time. Andrew's vivid memory is of when, at 4 years old, he went ice-skating with his dad on the iced over Penn Ponds. So just to give you a bit of context, the artist was born in 1958 and as a child growing up in the 1960s, Britain had very cold winters, not like the mild winters that we get today. For instance, here in Yorkshire when it snowed it would ice over and take weeks, even months to melt away. Penn Ponds would regularly freeze over in the winter, so imagine this naturally formed ice rink over the park lake. Did Andrew, as a child, feel wary of the ice, as he watched his father skate around it? Andrew tells us that when he was watching his father ice-skating, from the front seat of the car (the weather was rather bad that day), that his dad was blown across this frozen pond by the strong winds at the time. His father disappeared and so Andrew believed he had been sucked down one of two large drainage holes within the ice. These cylindrical bricked drainage holes would drain the water should the water level get too high. Andrew was left feeling shocked and scared, but also excited. However, we learn that this was just Andrew's imagination, and his father was fine.

The, what I call, chessboard ice rink of the sculpture, is both playful and mysterious. This chequered surface allows us, with its translucent squares, to see beneath the surface and reveals a complex inner space. Light is created and we can examine both its exterior and interior. It represents the crystalline surface of the iced over pond. The squares could be described as psychedelic or even Op Art. Who will make the first move across this precarious surface? The drainage holes of Andrew's story are represented here in the two large holes. Could you imagine his traumatising event as a child? The materials of this sculpture are harsh, and if you were to walk on this sculpture in real life you would seriously hurt yourself on the steel nails. The piece omits a threatening feeling. It generates excitement and wonder but trepidation at the same time. This idea of being dragged into a hole is reinforced with the black and white fungus like holes around it, perhaps they act more like orifices around the ice rink that could drag you in.

The playful comedy and yet menacing attributes of the artwork can be compared to the American Loony Tune cartoons, and in particular of the rivalry between Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner, whereby the Coyote would endlessly come up with inventive ways to capture his prey; Road Runner, like using 'black holes' bought from the fictional ACME Corporation. But he would always end up failing. So are these holes in the sculpture that drag you in, traps that are destined to fail?

So even if this piece is abstract and familiar at the same time, with the constant tension of dualities between materials and concepts, its metamorphic imagery allows us a way in to begin to understand this piece. Would you like to walk across this ice rink and try as you can to resist falling through its holes?