



Maths and Bodies: Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's 'Polyhedra'

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum

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Walking to the Tiwani Gallery, down the narrow London street of Little Portland Road, one is greeted by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's landscape window drawing, a rumination of her preceding renowned wall drawings. The work immediately invites one to engage with Sunstrum's exhibition from the outside.

The exhibition, 'Polyhedra', is Sunstrum's first show in the UK. Comprising video, drawing and paintings, it is an extension of the themes explored in previous exhibitions. At the forefront of her exploration into mythologies and theories of the creation of the universe is her foregrounding of scientific research throughout her artistic practice. The exhibition title already introduces one to the mathematical (primarily geometric) and scientific tenets that runs through all the works in the

exhibition. Polyhedra, loosely explained, refer to three-dimensional geometric shapes, examples of which include the cube and the pyramid.



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum *Polyhedra*, 2016.
Video animation

Taking its name from the exhibition title, Sunstrum's video, *Polyhedra*, is projected at the far end of the gallery space, and is a continued unpacking of the politicisation of landscape. The video is a montage of geometric shapes superimposed on flowing water, a technological mobile whose wheel turns alongside a cascade of streaming stars, a figure of a woman holding a glistening bowl, an eruption of a volcano and further superimpositions of galactic calculations and constellations. Drawing from eighteenth-century European Romanticism, the naturalistic

yet dramatic representation of landscape is coupled with otherworldliness. Sunstrum surprisingly deploys Romanticism's foregrounding of the artist's feelings and individualism – which are usually in direct opposition to the rationality of science brought about by the Enlightenment era – as part of her scientific explorations.

Sunstrum's paradoxical use of science and mathematics in the contestation of linear and single comprehensions of the universe brings to the forefront her insistence on the co-reliant relationship between science and mythology. Scientific theories, such as the Electric Universe Theory that Sunstrum continuously returns to, are perceived as concrete ideas that are based on rationality and truth. In a postcolonial ethos, Sunstrum employs fantastical narratives to defuse categorisation and concrete determinism, thus opening up possibilities of multiplicities.

Interestingly, other than the large window drawing, the rest of the landscape paintings in the exhibition are small, thus scaling down an entity as large, vast and never-ending as landscape within the confines of a small picture frame. The exhibition focusses on six life-size portraits of women that capture the eye as soon as one walks into the gallery. Titled *Panthea*, the drawings portray women in multiple positions, seeming to move within one picture plane. In each drawing, a woman is seen in numerous states of movement – it is unclear whether she is moving from a sitting position to a standing one, or the other way around. The movements are indicated by the same figure being drawn on top of itself in numerous positions. Sunstrum uses an artistic style to express different articulations of the same body through close proximity in space.



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum
Panthea 5, 2016. Graphite,
watercolour and carbon paper
transfer on paper

The motion of the body appears slowed down, thus echoing the slow pace of the video in the exhibition. While the movement of the figure suggests some form of freedom, it is curiously still confined within the geometric shapes (polyhedral) that connect the multiple points of the different positions of the figure in motion. The representation of the movement is enhanced by the hollow, soft line drawing of the figure. In this work, Sunstrum has found a strategy of allowing a two-dimensional artworks to move. In the drawing *Panthea 5*, the multiple positions of the moving figure, represented by two positions, deceptively appear to represent two women, one in the process of climbing on the other's back. The process of doubling and mirroring (represented by the mirror on the ground) are a reflection of theories of parallel universes and the existence of multiple selves in multiple space. In *Panthea 6*, the woman seems to physically split from herself, into two entities, recalling science fiction films when a parasite gives its host's body. The separation of one body into two makes possible a different and otherworldly interaction with the self.

In the paintings *Parallel 1* and *Parallel 2*, Sunstrum continues to open up one's physical relationship with oneself. She utilises multiple motifs to allude to the entry and access to another world. Through recognisable cinematic tools like the mirror (reflection) and the television screen (seeing into something else), the viewer is invited to look beyond what is immediately visible and to search for that which exists beyond normative parameters.

The experimental nature of Sunstrum's work, aptly reflected in the current exhibition, takes one on a journey through the depths of mathematical calculations and astronomical sketches. The experimentation in the work is not to be understood in the general sense of the concept. Instead, it is the research element of her practice that resembles a conduction of experiments and using her artworks as records of her process and findings. The experimentation appears in the form of that perennial search for truth, a means to an end, but the continuous 'struggle' to attain truth and the impossibility thereof are testament to the indeterminate nature of reality.