

AMIE DICKE 'SUCKING STONES': A STUDIO VISIT WITH AMELIA GROOM

Amelia Groom: Tell me about this work, 'thirty-eight and a half' – you mentioned it used to be something else?

Amie Dicke: Well, it used to be a book. An old book I bought second hand, full of these beautifully printed black-and-white pictures of religious sculptures. And originally I made a work with it, where the book was opened to two images of sculptures of Maria, and I pierced the pages so I could put a zip-tie through the eyes of each image. It was one of those things that you do without thinking, and then you have a result. But I wasn't convinced; there was something in it that made me allow it to stay, but there was also something in it that I wasn't sure about. So I put it aside for a long time – I never showed it. Then about a month ago I found it in a box, and I looked at it and I had the same feeling, after all those years. There was so much that I liked in it but it wasn't speaking back yet. It wasn't taking over. I felt like it was waiting there for me to do something else. So I started to play with it, I turned the page half way, and suddenly on the other side this image of two faces meeting was there. And I said, okay, this is the work – it was just half a page further! It's so strange how you just know – when something appears that you have made but also haven't made, because it was already there.

AG: You described a similar 'eureka' moment when your title for this exhibition, 'Sucking Stones', suddenly appeared from under the powder on the page of one of the covered books.

AG: True. The book was open, and the pages were completely covered with foundation powder so none of the text could be read. Then I was adding some bronzer make-up which comes in these little balls, and one of the balls left a trail where the word 'Stones' was uncovered. I became curious, because the balls were themselves a bit like stones rolling over the words, and I just pushed it a little further and I saw the full phrase, 'Sucking Stones'. I didn't know what it meant, and I didn't know it was from a Samuel Beckett story,

AG: But you knew it was the title for the show –

AD: Yeah, it wasn't even like 'maybe this is it' – it was like 'there it is!' I really believe that everything is already there, it's only a manner of giving it attention, and framing it, or having the conditions for it to emerge. Sometimes it's shocking how long it can take for you to see something, how it can be there the whole time waiting for you to be able to read it.

AG: The words Sucking Stones emerged only when they were framed by the obliteration; it was the combination of covering and uncovering that allowed them to appear.

AD: Yes and that becomes a new way of reading, or writing. The covering is never just about taking away, it's also about having a new appearance, or a reappearance. It's like this quote from Barthes that I wrote down here, "I resist looking at what presents itself as a priori worth looking at ... something I can't surprise." ... For me the covering is not about anger or negation. It's actually about love.

AG: Is that what's going on here with this popup library of books that you will include at Looiersgracht 60, with covered covers?

AD: Yes, I love these books. These are my favourites –

AG: And you felt the need to intervene in the existing covers?

AD: Well that starts with the simple reaction of being annoyed by an ugly cover. This is one from Simone Weil for example, the cover used to be this quite serious-looking photo of her face. I find it a bit terrible that they use the faces of writers in this way. I guess people like it – to see the face of the thinker, but I don't like it.

AG: Would you say that in general you have a problem with faces?

AD: Yes, because they work so strongly, they draw all your attention and then you immediately start to read them – man, woman, how old? Do they look tired, or beautiful? Do I know them? They remind me of this or this person – so it immediately draws you into all that easy categorizing, and it's often only about positioning yourself towards that person. And as much as that is a very interesting and wonderful way of looking at things, it also leaves out a lot. If you obscure the face, other parts of the image suddenly come forth. It can become more of a walk in the image, and I want to open up to that possibility.

AG: It's interesting that you are working with foundation power for this body of work, given your long engagement with modes of covering and the space of the face. In make-up, foundation is the colour that is supposed to be a non-colour, right? It's a covering on the surface of the face that is meant to be invisible – good foundation is unseen foundation. Maybe lipstick or eyeshadow can add new colours, but foundation is supposed to homogenize and create a non-image. Tell me, how did this gesture of covering the books with foundation begin?

AD: It started with this stone [covered in foundation powder] over here, which I did a few years ago. I always liked the idea of the word foundation; if you say it to an architect they see the solid foundations of a building, but then somebody else will see the delicate skin powder. And I just wanted these two meanings of the word to meet. So this powdered stone stood here in the studio for a long time, waiting to find another translation. Then I started to apply powder on the pages of open books, and I really liked the horizontality; it offered a view from above, and the surfaces became landscapes.

AG: Landscapes with a lot of words buried in them ...

AD: Yes. I love the words – I love to read and I will keep on doing it – but I also wanted to play with the surface, so the books don't remain as all these separate entities that are already categorized, but new relations can open up amongst them. I want everyone to trust their own reading.

AG: It seems important that the powder is not fixed, and it keeps accumulating traces of movement.

AD: Yes, that's very important. Because then it's still powder – the moment you fix it it's painting.

AG: I guess powder is somewhere between liquid and solid; it has fluidity but it's not wet... In other recent exhibitions you have used vitrine displays, but here the precariously powdered books are left exposed. How important is it for you that there is no mediation between the observer and the fragile object of observation?

AD: Sometimes you need the extra protective layer of the display and sometimes you don't. Recently I showed used bars of soap in a vitrine. In that instance I felt that the objects were immediately visible as things that had already been touched. Used bars of soap are things everyone has seen before, though maybe not displayed in a vitrine like that. The freshly powdered books on the other hand are not such familiar images – and that already has a distancing effect which makes the vitrine less necessary. And unlike the bars of soap, they seem very much untouched – any touch could disturb their surfaces, and I really want that sense of potentiality to be present.

AG: You have been working with sandpapered images for a while now, and you have included some new ones here where faces have been rubbed off the pages. What is the relationship between these sandpaper works and the powdered book works?

AD: I wonder what the relation between them is – I need to spend more time with them next to each other to learn how they work together. Somehow they feel very close, in the texture and in the sense of obliteration. But one is about subtraction and the other is about addition. In the sandpaper pieces I remove pigment from the pages, and it falls away as a fine dust. In the powdered books I add a covering of dust pigment over the pages. Both display a sort of raw materiality – the page minus the pigment or the page covered by pigment. In the powdered books it feels temporary though, there's this tension, because the surface could be touched and disrupted, while in the sandpapered image it's something irreversible that has already happened ...

AG: You are also including your worktable as part of the installation, where evidence of the process of powdering the books can be seen in the negative images left behind as powdered outlines ...

AD: Yes. I always like it when unplanned dimensions enter into the scenario. And I'm always playing with the relation between making and unmaking. As I started to move the powdered books away from the worktable I became fascinated by the patterns that were building up. Because they were not images I had made consciously, though they still referred to a making process. It fits with the interior of Looiersgracht 60, where you have all these layers and traces accumulated in the walls. I also like the idea that the powder left on the worktable is the powder that didn't make it to be part of the piece, but then it still has a little chance to be seen as an image – or as what comes after an image.

AG: Your powdered books are too delicate to be transported, you already told me will have to re-powder them all when you are installing at Looiersgracht 60. Are you planning on making anything else for the show once you are in the space?

AD: I'm planning another work in the outside patio. I wanted to keep working with the horizontality, and I wanted to introduce some colour, so what I am planning to do is leave a very thin horizon line with coloured powder along the patio wall. I'll use a line of wire, which you can pluck to transfer the powder over to a new surface in a straight line, and I plan to do it at the exact height of my mouth. So coming back to the image of Sucking Stones, mouth and rock ... It will be outside, exposed to the elements, so I'm not sure how long it will last, if it will remain visible, if it will start crying with the rain –

AG: Unpredictability seems to be a fundamental principal in your work –

AD: Yes, what I love about working with powder it is precisely the lack of control. The powder has its own way of falling. And everyone sees immediately that if you touch the fallen powder your touch will become a visible part of it. It's precarious, and it's not permanent; these are all my own books, and the idea is that after the exhibition the powder will be blown off and they will return to my studio. Of course some traces of the powder will remain – but traces are always welcome in my books.