Jo McGonigal

PALE GROUND 30th September – 28th October

**Materials:** Gritstone pillars: Siliceous sandstone containing Calcite, Clay Minerals, Quartz, Feldspar, Mica, and heavy and resistant minerals such as Garnet, Rutile and Titanite.

Sheepskin coats; Goat skin; Stone dust; Silt; Timer frame; Glazed Ceramic; Cord; Lycra.

In Jo McGonigal’s *Pale Ground*, the outcome of a month-long residency, we’re invited to move beyond painting’s traditional parameters and to consider painting as a dialogue with a physical space or site. Here, the site is Robinwood Mill, an early nineteenth-century cotton-spinning mill nested in a steep-sided ravine of the Upper Calder Valley. Immediately, the location opens-up a dynamic between the work, the gallery space, the mill, and the land(scape). ‘Ground’ hints at a circuit of correspondences in play, suggesting the prepared ground of a painting, the ground beneath the mill, the ground of debate and the active process of things ground down, transformed. McGonigal is keen to explore that which lies between, behind, underneath and inside the material processes of painting and this space. *Gesso*, the foundation or substrate of a painting (prepared by the artist using hide-glue and marble dust), is painted directly onto the walls of the gallery. This ‘pale ground’, exposed, centred, a thing to consider suggests the mill’s historic role in the cotton trade, where raw cotton, picked by enslaved Africans, was processed into pale white thread. Much longer timelines and deeper histories are hinted at by the placing of gritstone pillars in the gallery. Quarried on Todmorden moor, they mirror the fabric of the mill – its gritstone walls visible to the right, above the windows.

On entering *Pale Ground* we’re entering sedimented histories of time, place, and the practice of painting; its materials and processes – human, mineral, animal. The image of geological layering feels appropriate: stone; substrate; clay; chalk; dust. The ceramic pieces on show seem to interrupt the space, intrusions in the geological sense, or found things waiting to be laid down, worm casts, the bare loop of a girdle bone, the hip or shoulder of rabbit or hare.

A deep concern with materiality is at the centre of McGonigal’s practice and the concept of ‘spatial painting’. Painting is central to this exhibition, its compositional elements interrogated/enacted in the physical space of the gallery, rather than the illusory space of a flat surface. This ‘expanded field’ is underscored by her commitment to an expansive sense of ontology within post-humanist philosophy. Put simply, it’s a move that seeks to disrupt the strict divide between subjects-objects, moving away from hierarchy to something more horizontal in our understanding of and relations with ‘things’ – their power to act.

“ … *Thing-Powe*r: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” Jane Bennett (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Thing*s (p. 6).

Kelly Loughlin, September 2023.