

# Elaine Cameron-Weir's *Sculptor Galaxy*



Two black, rectangular volumes sit side-by-side on the floor to the left. One is ceramic, one glass. They are titled *Plinth I* and *Plinth II*, yet nothing rests on either. Moving clockwise to the wall opposite the door, a tall and skinny steel rod leans against the wall; it's covered in rolling tobacco, and titled *100 (steel)*. Stapled to the right-hand wall is an indigo square of silk, upon which are sewn four small brass bars in a vaguely geometric arrangement. This piece is untitled. There is something mute about Cameron-Weir's collection of objects in *Sculptor Galaxy*, her single-room, four-object show at Possible Projects in Philadelphia. They share the space without interacting directly, but through them Cameron-Weir generates a degree of mystery, a quietly humming energy. She has deftly placed each object so that it sits, stands, or hangs in what feels like a very particular spatial relation to its neighbors, and this specificity triggers the mind's instinct to interpret.

In the ensuing search for meaning, formal characteristics are magnified. One notes the textural difference between the ceramic and glass plinths, and that one plinth is about half the size of the other. Examining the tobacco-skinned steel rod, one encounters the sweet smell of the dried leaves, enough to roll one hundred cigarettes. And it's difficult not to see the brass rods on their indigo field as some vaguely familiar constellation. But through the

unmistakable smell of tobacco, Cameron-Weir may be asking that we keep the representational urge at bay.

Cameron-Weir's works are often impregnated with perfumes of her own creation, or with other powerful scents like coconut oil.

Smell is a potent vehicle for private associations, and the associative mode is quite different from that of representation. Tobacco's odor reminds me of my childhood piano teacher, a leathery man who stank unbearably of smoke, and whose hands felt inexplicably like gingerbread as they corrected my poor playing. Luce Irigaray famously said "the eye objectifies and masters...In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch, hearing, has brought about the impoverishment of bodily relations." Irigaray's critique identifies vision and visual representation as tools for establishing a sense of control, whose force could perhaps be interrupted by the more physical, enveloping nature of our other four senses. For example, the way in which smells transport us back inside an experience denies the opportunity for dominion described by Foucault in his analysis of the Panopticon. The Panopticon, a prison-design invented by Jeremy Bentham in 1785, consists of jail cells arrayed around a central observation tower,

such that any cell can be observed at any time, producing a removed, all-seeing vision that exerts power through surveillance.

The smell of tobacco in *Sculptor Galaxy* complicates the effort to stand at a remove and make judgments. The plinths support nothing at all, which ultimately feels less nihilistic than simply realistic. The brass bars on a blue field are just brass bars on a blue field; beautiful to look at, but no more representative of the night sky than a cloud of a cow.

So what, then, of the exhibition's title? According to Wikipedia, the sculptor galaxy is the central galaxy in the Sculptor Group, one of the nearest clusters of galaxies to our own Milky Way. You can see it with a good set of binoculars. The name derives from the galaxy's location in the constellation Sculptor, originally named The Sculptor's Workshop by Abbé Nicolas Louis de Lacaille. Cameron-Weir's work is a reminder that looking at art is not so different from looking at the stars. We give a star a name, we group stars into constellations, but all these operations are happening only in our mind. The stars burn on. So too with works of art: we can think what we wish about their context and meaning, but they continue their independent, mysterious existences. Yet naming unquestionably enriches our relationship to stars and to art; it probably creates our relationship to begin with. The smell of tobacco reminds us that our names and interpretations ultimately tell us little about the world, but a great deal about ourselves.

- Daniel Gerwin

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