

Review: Fiona Kirkwood's Rain at the 11th edition of the “From Lausanne to Beijing” Fiber Art Biennale.

By: Peter Machen

Most art is experienced mostly second-hand by most people. In general, we come to know artists and their bodies of work through photographs and prints, and to a lesser extent, writing and other commentary about art. Just because we have not actually 'seen' a work in its unmediated form does not substantially minimise the validity of our thoughts and experience about it. And so, writing about a work in the age of the coronavirus, which generally means looking at a website or a PDF, has reduced the access of most critics and arts writers to the realm of nearly-everyone-else. But while there's something appealing about this democratic flattening and the ways in which it could potentially expand audiences and markets, it's also frustrating. Art is seldom a two-dimensional experience, even when the work is – space and context are always part of the experience. My living room is nice but it ain't a gallery.

And so to Fiona Kirkwood's Rain, which garnered the first silver award at the 11th edition of the “From Lausanne to Beijing” Fiber Art Biennale, which bills itself as “the spiritual home of fiber art” and which, this year – for the first time – takes the form of an exclusively online event in a space that exists only virtually, but is also a concatenation, or weaving together, of physical spaces from around the world. (The invited artists were required to install and document the works in their home countries). Using nylon, steel wool, plastic, polyester fabric, and aluminum, Kirkwood's piece evokes the visual and emotional experience of rain. Suspended storm clouds, constructed from a blend of unravelled steelwool and nylon fishing line that has been painstakingly looped into itself, dispense a stream of faux rain drops comprised of small translucent plastic beads attached to nylon threads, which gives the effect of rain drops photographed with a long exposure. This simple arrangement hangs against a printed backdrop of these physical elements, shot against a dark background. The effect is like being in a Pierre-et-Gilles photograph, at once a contrived artifice and a hyperreal experience. But it is also a virtual experience – like everyone else, I have to imagine myself being there, a process that is easy but also shallow and unsatisfying. I want to, want to touch the work, to be in it. But I cannot. There is not even any 'there' to be in. So is lockdown life. So is the internet.

At the same time, the virtual space works well, and is constructed in a way that allows you to move through the exhibition in something approximating the mix of linearity and fluidity that would normally constitute movement through a gallery or museum space. And, although it might be a challenge for some artists, it's probably also nice – for some at least – to ensure that the work is curated in the way that they choose. On the whole, the virtual space recreates sufficiently a convincing evocation of the notion of place that I was compelled to message Kirkwood to ask if the works had actually travelled, or whether they were documented in their own countries of production.

In her artist statement, Kirkwood references the increasing intensity and number of droughts and wildfires around the world that are a consequence of climate change. And of course, while rain is a relief in some regions and seasons, in others, its increasing intensity and capacity for damage is likewise a consequence of our accelerated impact on the planet. Rain, which facilitates fertility, can also wash away the thin layer of top soil – and everything else. Like so much else, it is about balance, the fragility of which we are still discovering.

While rain is one of the most universally resonant metaphors, we also have local relationships with weather, and not all rains are the same. Now ensconced in Berlin, where the rain is nearly always cold and usually thin, I can't help but think of the line "I miss the rain down in Africa" and of days of unrelenting downpours from my Durban balcony, the rain turning to mist on the warm ground below. The lyrics to Toto's much-derided (but still over-played) song might reduce the continent to a single experience and geography, but they also contain a truth. Weather – and rain, in particular, I think – links us to place. And Kirkwood's Rain is not just any rain. It seems to me that it is Durban rain.

I also couldn't help but be reminded of Danish artist Berndnaut Smilde's ephemeral cloud installations and Olafur Eliasson's attempts to bring elements of weather into galleries and public spaces. As a fibre artist, Kirkwood dwells at least partially in the realm of representation, and her fairly literal construction of the experience and perception of rain is, of course, not identical to rain. On casual inspection, even in the photographs, the construction or artifice is clear. But rain also exists in our heads, and sometimes, when things are less real, as art usually is in a fundamental way, they manage to be more real, perhaps even more true. And the work does a very good job of evoking both our associations with rain and seeming, at first glance, to look and feel very much like rain.

While all media and disciplines are obviously affected by the current crisis, keeping Rain exclusively in the realm of the digital is particularly sad – it's eminently instagrammable, as evidenced by the engaging pic of the artist herself. But beyond the viral possibilities of social media, I can't help but return to the fact that the installation, crystalised and (almost) universally accessible in its virtual space, cries out to be walked through, to be experienced - like rain itself.

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