



Artist: Isabelle Cornaro

Title: Installation view of Paysage avec poussin at the South London Gallery, 2015.

Website: <http://www.southlondongallery.org/>

Credit: Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Andy Keate.

Isabelle Cornaro: Passage avec Poussin  
South London Gallery, London  
24 January – 5 April 2015  
*Review by Fiona Haggerty*

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**The seventeenth century landscapes of classical French artist Nicholas Poussin, act as a point of departure for Isabelle Cornaro's solo exhibition at the South London Gallery. In the main gallery the installation 'Paysage avec poussin et temoins oculaires' is loosely based on the painter's ordered and methodical structuring of objects within pictorial space. It is the sixth work in a series began by Cornaro in 2008 and acts as the central piece in this exhibition that also features two short films in the first floor galleries.**

Standing directly in front of the large installation, made up of museum-like pedestals and walls of varying heights with seemingly random objects placed on top of them, the first impression is that of a meticulous adherence to an outmoded notion of curatorial order gleaned from Poussin's classicism. This compositional system lends to the visual signification of value, the presentation of certain objects as more precious than others.

Cornaro subverts this structure by placing atop these rich navy walls objects that seem to bare absolutely no relation to one another. In order to inspect these objects - this installation demands inspection - you must walk between the walls and around the opulent plinths, an act that triggers an unraveling of the initially ordered whole.

It is as if the simple act of walking into the installation reveals the strings behind the puppetry of contemporary display - particularly here museum display - those mechanisms that are founded upon western-centric, colonial era systems of value still very prevalent today. Cornaro, then, reveals these systems and essentially poses three questions to the viewer: why is a certain object deemed more valuable than another? Who gets to decide visual value and what influence does this imposed system of value have on our understanding of the world?

The two films in the first floor galleries also deal with the mechanisms of display. Instead of the viewer moving around the objects it is the camera that moves. Coloured lights flicker over these objects, which alongside the ever-changing angles alter their appearance. This is perhaps a less interesting handling of her subject. The activation of the viewer called for by the installation is a far more nuanced intervention into the act of looking. However, the films do serve to further clarify the artist's investigation.

Cornaro is also an art historian specialising in sixteenth century European Mannerism. Her approach to contemporary making seems to be deeply informed by history and her dual roles as artist and art historian. From Poussin to Cezanne - his famous dictum on painting: 'treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone' continuously comes to mind when viewing this work- through to minimalism and the moving image, Cornaro questions contemporary modes of viewing through a deconstruction of display that is firmly rooted in art historical investigations.

In the age of the post-internet artist this is an interesting trajectory. We live in a contemporary moment where the shadow of the past and its ever-present effect on our viewing experience is often obscured by the omnipresence of the digital realm. Cornaro's work serves as a reminder. A reminder that the experience of viewing has not dramatically changed, and that the act of looking at objects still hinges on western dominant modes of value that need to be rethought in the museum and gallery so that they might be rethought more broadly, not only culturally but also socially.