

Nigel Hall

From Memory

Opening Thursday 1st February 2018, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 2nd February – 14th April 2018

Nigel Hall 'enjoys walking in landscape'. He has honed his perception of the world on countless walks, not only in Chile's vast empty deserts, but also among the harshly beautiful crags in Switzerland's Engadine Valley, or under the dome of intense light in the French Mediterranean. Drawing inspiration from the calmness he experiences as he is in motion, he chiefly considers spatial dimensions. This is how he has described his observation of the phenomenon: 'Landscape has a stillness until the observer moves. You see things moving nearby while distant objects are still.'

If Hall occasionally creates naturalistic drawings of people, plants and other natural subjects, as well as places, in works that are rarely on public display, it is for the clear, pared-down geometries in his sculptures and drawings, the compression of his own perception of landscapes and other objects into pure forms that he has achieved fame. Avoiding the mere illustration of surrounding space, these works translate his observations into stark lines and reduced forms, revealing how he explores relations between light and shade, line and plane, form and void, stillness and motion.

Some years ago, Hall embarked on Southern Shade, a series of sculptures inspired by the south of France. He has been fascinated by the striking umbrella-shaped crowns of the pine trees, the myriad shapes of their branches, and the play of light and shade among them that creates elliptical shapes in varying dimensions. Hall transforms these shapes into spacious vessels filled with light, or else full of darkness. Hall is drawn to sculpture for its potential to produce spatial experiences. He says of his three-dimensional works that they open the view, not unlike a landscape where the sky is visible through the trees. Setting the space in motion, the walker's gaze again comes into play.

Hall not only creates sculptures but also monochrome and colour drawings. Forming an autonomous part of his work rather than sketches for his sculptures, they allow him to explore the issue of perception on a smaller scale. The artist compares his works on paper with the small plot of a Japanese garden in which the clever use of perspective creates the optical illusion of a space that is far larger than the garden's actual dimensions.

Some of Hall's drawings feature shapes and forms, applied in gouache: deep yellows, blacks and reds. Also visible, and adding a rough and unfinished touch, are some sketchy charcoal lines and smudges that hint at the actual manual work involved. The charcoal articulates the pictorial space, adding shadows or aureoles to the apparent flawlessness of the forms in colour, and bringing another, less clearly defined dimension to these drawings.

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The elliptical forms that dominate Hall's sculptural works and drawings allude to the artist's walk-honed perception that all is mutable and finite. Reflecting his own views of landscapes and spaces, they allude to the fact that circular shapes appear as ellipses in perspectival distortion as we move past them. Changes produced by chronological shifts also play a role in these works created From Memory rather than photographs. Evoking the artist's approach, the title of this exhibition also alludes to the loss of his wife, who was his companion and conversational partner for more than forty years.

As this essay has shown, Nigel Hall's work is characterised by formal restraint and a stark elegance. Hall lives and works in London. He studied at the West of England College of Art, Bristol and then at the Royal College of Art, where he also became a tutor. He was Head of Sculpture at the Chelsea College of Arts, and was elected a Royal Academician in 2003.

His works have been widely shown and are in collections around the world, including Tate London, England, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, Germany, the National Museum of Art in Osaka, Japan, the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, USA, and Kunsthau Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland.

Alice Henkes

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