

# Alchemy of seeing

Much spoken about following her graduate exhibition, **Sean O'Toole** catches up with young Cape Town artist Daniella Mooney to ask about an oil spill

**BYT/02/2010** The context: a graduate exhibition at the Michaelis School of Fine Art. The time: early afternoon, December 2009. The venue: an artist's studio on a first floor. The text on the wall explains that the sculptural objects on display belong to Daniella Mooney. One work in particular dominates the space. Entitled *Your Sky*, it is not easily described. Here goes. Suspended in space by cable rigging, a square-shaped object hovers over two wooden ladders. The ladders are an invitation to poke your head through the bottom of the floating object. Naturally you do. It's then that you encounter a still, polluted lake of engine oil, 40 litres of the stuff.

As these things have a habit of doing, the oil managed to sully a curious visitor to Mooney's exhibition, titled *A Rainbow in Curved Air* (after minimalist composer Terry Riley's second album from 1967).

"I think she had a bit of 'fro and got oil all over her," chuckles Mooney, formerly of Nelspruit but now a resident of Cape Town, when we meet. Dressed in white blouse and black jeans, her manner hesitant but confident, her small hands animatedly aiding her many explanations, Mooney tells how the angry viewer eventually tracked her down, by telephone. "I apologised profusely. I realised I should have put up a sign."

Text. It is both an ally and enemy of the visual. For her graduate exhibition, which earned Mooney the top mark in her year (but not the Michaelis Prize), she prepared a short artist's statement. It provides a useful insight into the thinking underpinning the sparse array of sculptural objects on her exhibition, amongst them a curved sphere made of mahogany wood and carved table lamp with its solidified beam of light.

"This body of work has unfolded as an exploration and understanding of light," offers Mooney's statement. "Light, being multi-faceted in nature, permeates every aspect of reality, and as easy as it is to know what light is, it is harder to tell what light is. Many of the works try capture some of the intrinsic qualities that light possess; be it the transcendent effect of looking up toward the blue sky, the ephemeral essence of a rainbow, or the intangible rays extending from the sun."

Supervised by Jane Alexander and Gavin Younge, I ask Mooney where the initial impulse for her work came from. Her third year exhibition, she says, referring to a leaf canopy she installed in a small room: "I tried to recreate light falling through the leaves, that dusk feel." The idea was to evoke the sensations of light in an unfamiliar environment so as to "make the spectator view it in a different way".

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She mentions the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, also James Turrell. Obvious references, once you think about it, unobvious when you consider how their ideas are engaged locally. Since we're charting influences, I ask about her ex-partner, the young Cape Town sculptor Rowan Smith: "I admire his skill. It was great because we both love working with wood. He really opened my eyes to wood carving and assembling."

Previously an assistant to Paul Edmunds and hard at work helping Julia Rose Clark when we meet, I ask about the title to her graduate show. Was it important?

"Quite. It tied it together quite well. The work is about perception. A rainbow in curved air would mean that the rainbow is straight and the air is curving the rainbow. It is about how you choose to perceive that, which would make it a reality for you. I forget who it was, but someone described the Terry Riley album as two spatially separated mirrors" – she giggles momentarily – "which also fits well with my work."

Interestingly, *Your Sky*, the centrepiece of Mooney's show, was originally conceived as an outdoor work.

"I wanted the oil to reflect the real sky. Working with the elements, especially in Cape Town, it's a headache. I had to size it down, which became interesting. Working with restraints pushes you to find more interesting and innovative solutions to this phenomenon, which is so intangible."

Given her interest in ephemeral things, I ask Mooney if she keeps a diary or sketchbook to record the evolution of her ideas. She looks at me cross-eyed. I'm obviously being cute, it implies – or simply old-fashioned. Her sketchbook is a computer screen, she says, the archive of her work contained in her

diligently catalogued bookmarks. How does she categorise her bookmarks? Scientifically: Copernican Revolution, Buckminster Fuller, Alchemy and so on. Buckminster Fuller!?

"He had this theory that equated light to thought," offers Mooney. "If you can transmit and send off light signals and beams, you should be able to do the same with thoughts. He believed our eyes are receivers and transmitters for thought. It is just wonderful, the idea of beaming your thoughts into the atmosphere."

*Sean O'Toole is editor of Art South Africa*

**TOP LEFT** Daniella Mooney, *Your Sky*, 2009, mixed media, used engine oil, 244 x 244 x 25cm

**TOP RIGHT** Warning note installed after 'accident' in studio

**BOTTOM** Daniella Mooney, *If the Doors of Perception were cleansed*, 2009, Mahogany Sapele, airbrushed perspex, 35.5 x 35.5cm

