



HAMMER

Siobhan Liddell

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UCLA **HAMMER** MUSEUM

HAMMER PROJECTS

Siobhan Liddell

Anna Blume

What can we do with the sadness in our lives? Thousands of years ago, when we were traveling as nomads, perhaps it was sadness and longing that made us stop and begin to draw animals. Even then, before the formation of cities, bison and aurochs must have looked so free to us and so much closer to the elements. And we seem to have imagined that animals were closer than we were to the constellations and to other worlds beyond what we could see. Were we lonely even then for the sky and earth and water, as we are now?

What are we thinking about, you and I? We may be worried about money or what to wear, but somewhere, not so far from those concerns, are questions about our birth and death, where we came from and where we are going, and whether we are air or earth. What caves do we go to and what drawings do we make when we think about such things? In her work, Siobhan Liddell takes us someplace with all the closeness and protection of a cave. There, gently, as if by the hand, she takes us close to the rays of the sun made with zinc yellow pencils, close to fossils made of plaster in black and white, as if to show us the bones and then the materiality of their shadow.

When we first see Liddell's work, we may not recognize what we are looking at. One day I walked into her studio to find bonelike wooden carvings projecting from the joint in the wall. After a while I began to see that she was mixing architecture and anatomy, presenting me with a question of where I was and what I was made of. Does my body stop with my flesh? Am I so different from a tree with limbs? Will I hold up in a storm? If we are willing to follow these questions with her, each one, like the veins in our body, will lead back to the heart. In one of Liddell's installations I saw blue pigment on the wall and wondered whether she had painted the blue on the wall or whether it was a reflection from the colored paper she had hung nearby.

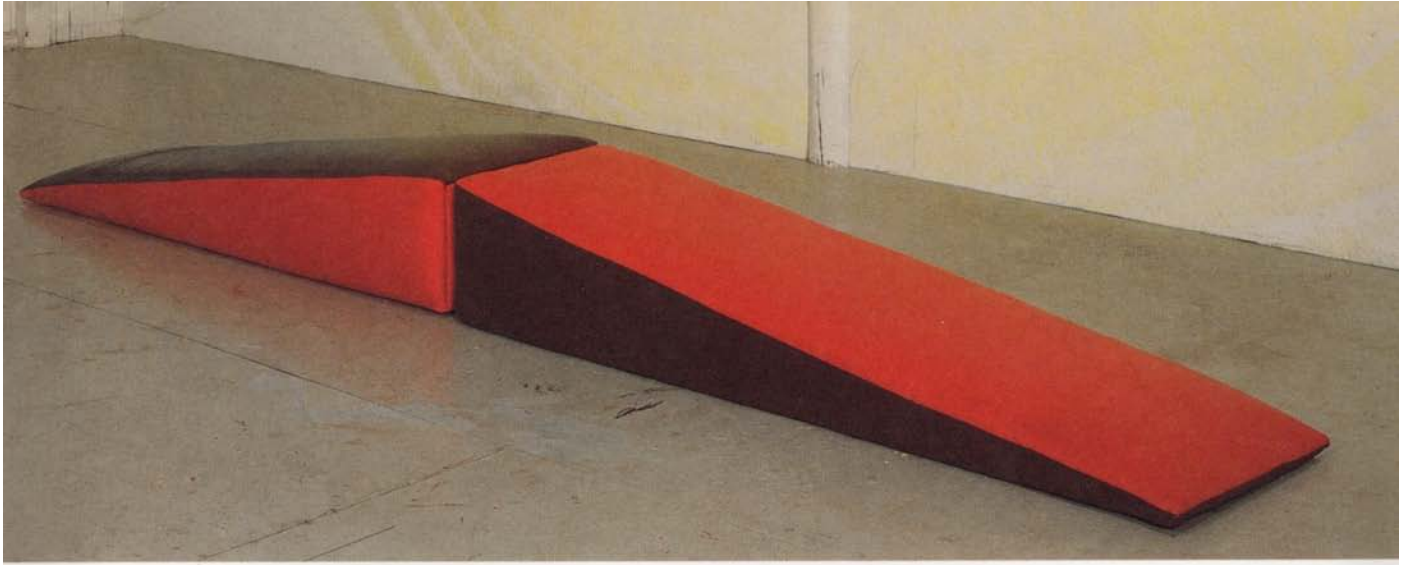
Liddell wants us to wonder, to take notice of our senses. In a handwritten segment of a piece entitled *after talking with Paul Steen*, she writes: "I sat still for say 2 hrs. The sun dropped down dead center of the two mountains. The light made everything change, constantly, slowly. And all that time being was all that it could be. Light watching transforma-



Hammer Projects are a new series of contemporary exhibitions and installations.

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Nest #1 (from the Nests series), 1997–98. Paper and glue. Courtesy Bob van Orsouw Gallery, Zurich.



tions. That's all in a flower right down to the smell. Making sense of a sense."¹ There is so much that is telling here. Even her handwriting is a little like marks birds make when they walk along the beach, beckoning us to follow. Writing, such a solitary act, begins with conversation. And what she has written continues to unfold something about intimacy and dialogue.

In her installation at the UCLA Hammer Museum, Liddell has used the small, enclosed space as a vessel to hold many components, each one related to or reminiscent of some basic element. When we walk into the room, we are not left out or kept in our place as spectators, ideating about her work. Rather, we are most graciously included. Color from the walls touches our skin, and the random sounds in this close chamber lead back to our own breathing, taking us to some primordial place in each of us. She uses the echo in the room as a way to travel across the boundaries of our skin into our heartbeat. Once there, she begins to lure us, as if with a lullaby, to move our eyes slowly from wall to wall. Elsewhere in the room she has placed two triangular leather-coated ramps filled with cotton batting. Do we dare lie down on them, give up our standing position to look and listen? Then the color on the walls might begin to blend with the red of the ramp and it would be like twilight, that time of melding colors and of fantasy, when shadows are as substantial as forms. It is a time of dawn that we could enter, much like what we imagine for the beginning or the end of the world.

There is something in Liddell's work that poses an alternative for us, an alternative to reason that is closer to intuition and that even playfully touches on the possibility of magic. Sleepwalking a little, without the years of obsessive training required of the medieval alchemists, she does walk among them, however, well versed in the art of mixing diverse materials. Unlike them, she is looking not for the philosopher's stone or a way to transmute base metals into gold, but for just the opposite. She is looking for air and water and earth and their components. Not the precious substances that set us at each other's throats, but the everyday ones that we so easily take for granted, yet without which we would die.



Meaning sleeps in her work much as it sleeps in us. It is when we walk into the room that it begins to unfold. As with most things we care about, we can't just say these things outright; we often walk around our thoughts and tease them out in metaphors or other approximations. We look to the elliptical realm of poetry, "the refuge of art," as Nabokov called it, to find some bridge out from ourselves. And Liddell, like the ethereal she/he creature Ariel, casts a spell over us so that we may enter that refuge and find some peace and quiet for a while, not away from ourselves, but with ourselves. I imagine her working in her studio, finally freed from Prospero, long after he has said, "Then to the elements/Be free, and fare thou well."²

And that brings me back to my original question: What can we do with the sadness in our lives? And the only answer that I can think of, one that can be found here in her work and in ourselves, is love.

Anna Blume received her Ph.D. in the history of art from Yale University. She currently teaches and writes in New York City.

Notes

1. Siobhan Liddell (New York: Thread Waxing Space, 1993).
2. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 5.1.321–22.

Center top: *Red Ramps*, 2000. Leather, canvas, wood, rubberized horsehair, and cotton batting. Photo by Liz Deschenes. Center bottom: Installation view, Bob van Orsouw Gallery, Zurich, 1998. Courtesy Bob van Orsouw Gallery, Zurich. Above: Untitled (one element), 1999. Papier-mâché with plaster, clay, and gesso. Courtesy CRG Gallery, New York. Photo by Liz Deschenes.

Cover: *Burst* (detail),
1996–99. Colored pencil on
paper. Courtesy CRG Gallery,
New York. Photo by
Liz Deschenes.

Below: Untitled (spectrum),
1999. Glass rods in seven
parts. Courtesy CRG Gallery,
New York. Photo by
Liz Deschenes.

Left: Video still from *Glint*,
1995. Directed by Siobhan
Liddell and Tom Payne.



**Biography**

Siobhan Liddell was born in 1965 in Worksop, England. In 1986 she received a B.F.A. from Saint Martins School of Art in London. Except for a three-year period of travel, she has lived and worked in New York since 1986. Her work has been exhibited internationally as well as in New York at The Drawing Center, Thread Waxing Space, the New Museum, and the 1995 Whitney Biennial.

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