

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

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CHRISTOPHER MCNULTY ATLANTA

Christopher McNulty's solo exhibition *Days* takes the artist's philosophical preoccupation with compulsive mark making to another level [Saltworks Gallery; September 8—October 20, 2007]. In previous work, recourse to notational systems and mathematical processes afforded McNulty a means to articulate his desire for perfection, while the inclusion of imprecision and chance acknowledged the impossibility of the endeavor. Although the artist's measured processes ultimately succumbed to both natural and human fallibility, McNulty viewed his repetitious tasks as meditative exercises that encouraged mindfulness of the here-and-now of human existence.

In *Days*, acquiescence to this *hic et nunc* assumes a greater sense of urgency with the introduction of another existential dilemma: the artist's reckoning with his own mortality. With the aid of computer programs, he determined his life expectancy and then produced a series of works premised on his number of remaining days. In *20,534 Days*, 2006, rows of graphite hatch marks totaling 20,534 create an incomplete square, while in *20,183 Days*, 2007, the ghostly imprint of a circle appears through the careful application of 20,183 dots of grey and sepia-toned watercolors.

A meditative aspect continues to inform McNulty's labor-intensive processes, as does the intending contradiction of perfection and fallibility. The task of forming circles and squares—shapes that variously embody ideals of perfection—inevitably yields inconsistencies: forms overlap and marks stray off course as McNulty's hand tires, or his mind wanders. These digressions, whether from exhaustion, boredom or distractedness, nonetheless yield visual beauty that captures the infinitesimal possibilities of an otherwise reductive system. By variously bleaching, embossing, drawing, painting, and burning his images into existence, McNulty not only creates something anew with each work, but he also registers the regenerative potential of living in the present moment.

Yet by referencing an end point, *Days* also potentially casts the notions of presentness and infinitude into doubt. Though all of the works ultimately serve as measurements of an anticipated death, the square compositions do so more apparently. In these, McNulty stresses incompleteness; likewise, he favors the use of hatch marks—which are conventional notations for recording time. In *20,534 Days*, the cessation of marks implies a premature demise.

Of the circular compositions, *20,045 Days*, 2007, serves as the greatest portent of McNulty's mortality. The largest work in the show, the drawing is formed by the artist's inky fingerprint, applied with varying pressure to form a rich pattern of light and dark concentric rings. As an indexical trace of the artist's corporeal existence, however, the work is not the most compelling of the show. More provocatively, in *20,097 Days*, 2007, the artist created a saline solution based on the ratio of water to salt in human tears, then carefully administered 20,097 drops of the solution onto raw canvas. The resulting image, the palest ghost of a circle edged in crystalline salt deposits, infuses a simple chemical transformation with the solemnity of a life-altering experience.

A different sensibility seems to inform *20,249 Days*, 2007, a work McNulty created by repeatedly aiming a dart at a piece of paper. One of his most idiosyncratic tools, the dart seems by turns disturbingly destructive and harmlessly prosaic. Here as with *20,087 Days*, 2007, a spherical sculpture formed by the globular excretions of a glue gun, a hint of playful irony emerges—part dada, part Zen Buddhist in spirit. Perhaps unintentional, irony also inflects the project as the viewer realizes that McNulty's preoccupation with mortality is based on a life expectancy of fifty-plus years. Meditating on this future date seems admittedly indulgent and ironically fruitless, though the resulting artwork proves to be neither.

—Susan Richmond

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Christopher McNulty, *20,193 Days*, 2007, burnt paper, 22 x 22 inches (courtesy of the artist and Saltworks, Atlanta);