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Pilar Corrias Gallery, 54 Eastcastle street, London, W1W 8EF, 28 Sep 2011

Elizabeth Neel: Sphinx Ditch

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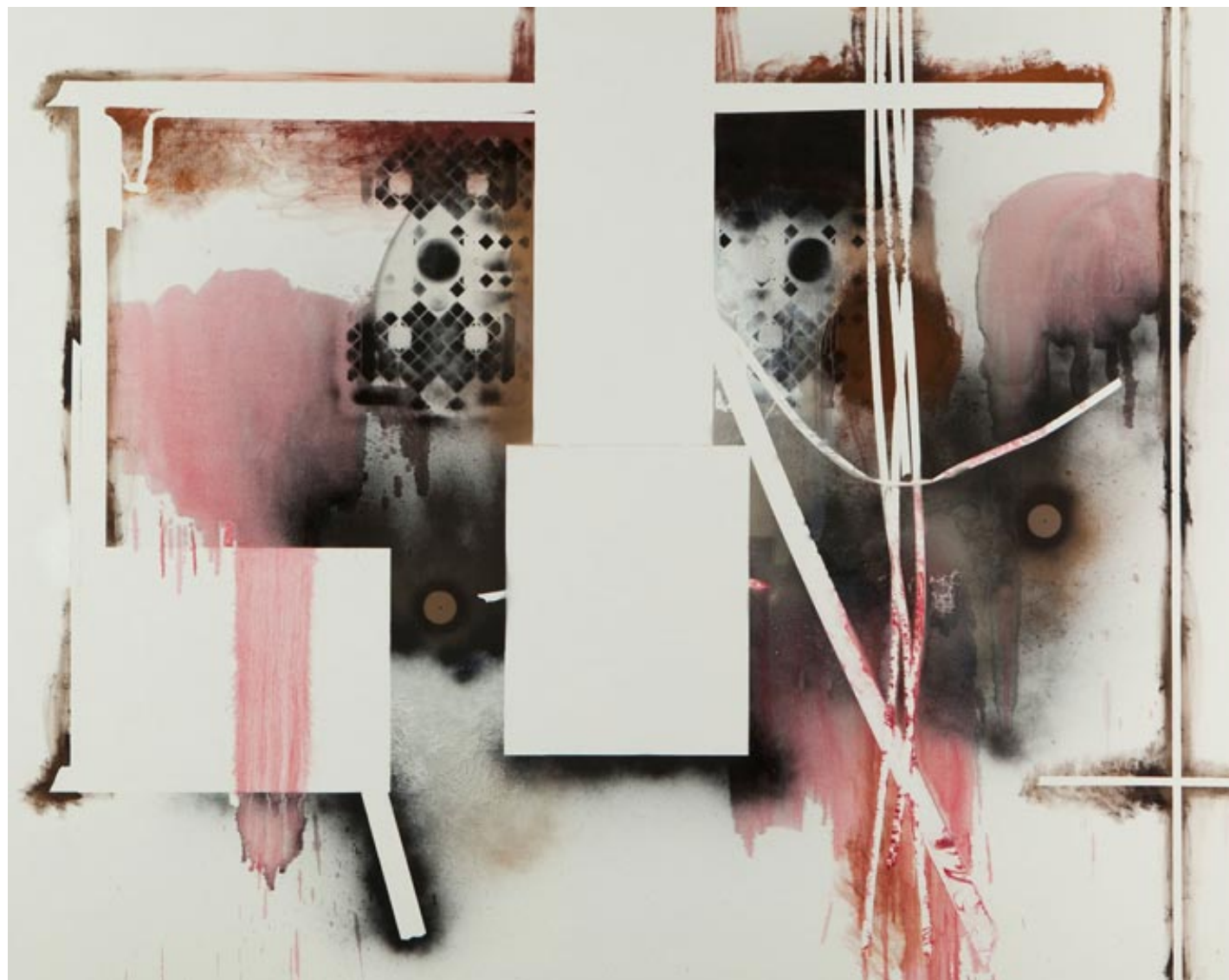
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Artist : Elizabeth Neel

Title : Sphinx Ditch 1

Website : www.pilarcorrias.com/

Credit : Courtesy Pilar Corrias Gallery



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Elizabeth Neel review by Cherry Smyth



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John Cage, whose music and art relied on chance operations using the I Ching said that he gathered wild mushrooms because he needed an activity that could not allow any chance. In Elizabeth Neel's first solo show in London, there is similar tension between the random and the formal in her use of materials and the presentation of the show. The show consists of three elements: abstract paintings, sculptures using found objects and constructed material, and scatterings of photocopies of found images often of animals on the floor, laid out in shapes suggested by the Rem Koolhaas designed gallery. The interplay between the organic and the inorganic, indoor design and outdoor wildlife cohere the formal elements. Her large paintings rely on a ground of masked off areas which has been spray-painted over in smeary layers of colour and the application of thinned oils. In her move away from figurative-abstraction towards a more abstract style, she seems to need the 'props' of masked-off areas to balance and contain the looser areas of colour, as we need to use literal and metaphorical fences and groupings to categorise and control aspects of nature and history. Just as the Sphinx in Giza is surrounded by a protective ditch, so these masking tape lines frame the dynamic and powerful impulse behind the colour abstraction. Sometimes Neel leaves the ribbons and rectangles formed by the masked-off blocks empty, but the paintings really take off when she paints a subtext within them as in 'Relation to a Journey', 2011, when the rectangles act as snatched windows of memory, as in filmic frames or photographic images, painted in the lyrical evocative palette of wooded landscape set amongst streaks of Yves-Klein blue and spore-like green and brown marks. In the painting 'Gate the Shades', 2011, once again the formal 'man-made' lines left by the masking tape cut through and powerfully offset the blurs of spray paint and bubbling cell-like use of oils. If the spray paint and oils dialogue between the urban and the rural, between street art and the pastoral landscape tradition, her sculptures play off the textures of shed skins against the armatures of wire and wood. In 'Slept and Slept,' 2011, a sheepskin is draped over a set of poles resembling ballet trainings bars, nodding to a photocopy on the floor of two ballerinas and also having fun with the idea of the body, either highly sculpted or bestial and 'natural', now a flopped casing. 'The Younger', 2011, is also a highly successful anti-plinth work in which a couple of tie-dyed and spray-painted T-shirts are stretched over a trolley-like structure mounted on a wooden L-shaped shelf. This sculpture feels less mechanistic than some of the larger paintings, because the folds of the encrusted and re-used clothing bear the marks of the human body and its emotional field. This may be a transitional show for the 36 year old artist but it has authority, depth and enough ideas to sustain her new formal practices.

Cherry Smyth is a poet, critic and curator based in London
