

Maddie Rose Hills: Studio Essay, written by Verity Babs, 2021

Hills sends me the jpegs of the works going into the Studio show and I'm struck by their otherworldliness. They seem to be communicating but in a language that I don't speak. Built up using layers of pulped paper, rectangular masses push through the flat surface layer, creating patterns reminiscent of ancient iconography: in one piece a star, in another a ziggurat-like base above which an empty halo hovers. They feel sacred and worn down, having been passed from generation to generation, handled and studied. I want to hold them and run my hand over their raised edges. I feel as though some primordial knowledge would be passed into my body. These pieces and their subsurface structures are perfect examples of the artist's devotion to texture, layer build-up, and lengthy evolutions. During her BA at Bristol and for a short while afterwards, Hills was creating large-scale abstract work, intending to document time through multiple layers of paint, worked on for up to half a decade at a time.

Now, in the first months of her Art and Material Histories MA at City and Guilds, her dedication to "slow art" continues. In the course, the artists focus on one material and its scientific, cultural, and historical background: Hills' material of choice is pulped paper. With her work, we see a return to "slow art" (as opposed to the speed and cleanliness seen in the production of contemporary ready-mades or work from Warhol's Factory); ever-evolving pieces which the artist tends to over time, watching layers dry, materials crack, and surfaces thicken. Hills' work is slow in a double sense; it is the product of a lengthy process but also demands time from the viewer for deep inspection. "Slow art" requires the intimacy of live-viewing, as opposed to the quick gratification of digital imagery and more readily 'Instagrammable' works. Although more people than ever are visiting art galleries, the average time spent viewing each work is around 18 seconds. Our viewing habits in a gallery now mimic our infinite scrolling through social media and anyone who has been to an art gallery in the last decade has seen visitors looking at the art directly through their phone camera. Hills' practice, which begs for patient, three-dimensional viewing, is a direct rebellion against this type of digitally-intravenous art consumption.

Words by Verity Babbs.