

Alicia Foster

Sweet Currents

The Recent Work of Susan Stockwell

A flotilla of small boats made of paper money and travel tickets are configured on the floor in what David Cameron might call a 'swarm'. They belly out and then tail off, appearing at the same time intensely fragile and, in their sheer number, purposeful and unsettling. Susan Stockwell then shifts scale to what she has called 'Sail Paintings'. Now we are full height in front of the real thing, swathes of stained cloth and printed plastic suspended from walls and ceiling, the practical, unlovely material of sea journeys at the same time a poetic gallery installation.

This deft sleight of hand, this shift of view, unites all of Stockwell's practice from her early rubber pieces of the late 1980s and early 1990s to her recent exhibition, *Sea-Markings*, created as the first Fine Artist in Residence to be hosted by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the summer of 2015. In the august surroundings of the RSC she hung her sails and installed her fleet. The work, made in response to the staging there of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, was not heavy handed in its dealings with racial difference and immigration. Stockwell managed the difficult feat of calibrating her work exquisitely so that such matters are suggested, but never forced to a dull, thumping didactic point.

A stand-out piece from that exhibition was the beautiful small drawing – pencil with wax staining – of a solitary figure huddled over the oars in a rowing boat, which wrenchingly evoked the danger and precariousness of *Othello's* (and *Shylock's* for that matter) position as transient outsiders in sixteenth-century Venice. Susan Stockwell, in her current show at Patrick Heide Contemporary Art, draws and draws upon the experience of now in which the outsider is part of a large group, haphazardly and hazardously migrating, caught up in a dense tangle of political uncertainty and upheaval like Stockwell's worn reels boxed in webs of red thread.

That Stockwell has continued to cull such profound allusions from her tough, prosaic, unpromising materials is a measure of her stature, and also her preparedness to take a precarious route herself, not to fall back on platitudes, on the safe old ways of making, in order to respond to a world which is so dangerously shifting and uncertain for so many of its inhabitants today.