

MATERIAL PRESENCE

BILLY TILLY, MATERIAL PRESENCE: A DOMESTIC SCENE PUBLICATION

In her exhibition *Material Presence* Zoe Preece suspends time. In so doing, she allows us to look deeply into the ordinary. Offering one's full attention to something, to be present with it, can be the first means of honouring it.

The kitchen table, cutlery, crockery and cookware are all familiar accompaniments to the routines of our day. The porcelain forms found in this exhibit, however, are a world away from their prosaic cousins embroiled in the commotion of domestic life. Stacks of bowls, cups balanced one on top of the other, a colander, a saucepan, now stand in a newly silent world. Carved by hand or on the lathe in plaster, the forms are moulded and slip cast in porcelain. With pure white surfaces smoothed to a flawless finish, they are at once familiar and removed, the subtly graded tones of light on their sheer bodies as sensitive and fluid as touch. They have become something else. No longer particular, messy, marked with the evidence and history of use; they take on an ideal, essential quality, unrooted from time and place.

A saucepan, with soft pouring lip and subtly arching handle, takes on new elegance and composure. Light arcs around the sharp line of a bowl's rim effortlessly. Nothing interrupts the clean, precise lines of these forms. The pure whiteness of the porcelain diffuses the light, and draws our eyes to these unexpectedly resonant objects. They are potent now.

Through her simple arrangements, Preece draws our attention to form, and also to the quality of our own ways of looking. For these are not portraits that return our gaze, these are still lifes inviting our deep and unbroken contemplation. As the Norwegian explorer Erling Kaggeⁱ discovered, trekking across Antarctica's featureless expanse of ice and snow, we are transformed by bringing our sustained attention to the subtle, the nuanced, the overlooked.

Attempting a perfectly rendered colander from a clay whose nature it is to retain the memory of its making, allows every slight to be evidenced in the distorting heat of the kiln. And yet it is in this very endeavour that a grace is revealed. Porcelain is a living material. It is responsive to the hands and hidden intentions of the maker. It is exacting in its requirement for the maker to be fully present during the interaction between them both.

Almost undetected in the midst of these refined forms is the escapee from all of this structure: the pool of flux welling over the teaspoon's edge, at once cradled and restrained by the rim of the spoon. Reaching out beyond its borders, it is the gaze glancing on, the movement of the inner self, before a change becomes visible. Through her understanding of ceramic materials and their mutability Preece provides a voice for that which we are unable to find words. There is a knowing of one's material here, when to intervene, when to encourage and when to arrest change.

This image is extended in Preece's wall of porcelain spoons. Titled 'An Archive of Longings', the spoon becomes a metaphor for all that we are or long to be. Some hold the original raw material from which their refined selves are made. Others contain a precise balance of porcelain and flux, caught in the heat of the kiln chamber in different stages of

melt. This wall of spoons is a recollection of other states of being. Within the structures of everyday living, we sense those other states breathing: the wilder, the freer, the undomesticated. This dynamic tension, between pure formal structure and transitory moments of flux, between restraint and fluidity, is a deep and ever present conversation within Preece's practice.

Preece's kitchen table made from walnut exists as a part of this conversation. The tabletop features a rucked tablecloth marked by dishes that once sat upon it, a knife, a spoon, the remnants of food that has been eaten. These ephemeral remainders of a meal, like their half-eaten, half-peeled counterparts within still life painting, have now become a monument to this moment. Emergent over time through a CNC milling process that gradually pares away layers of walnut, the surface of the table is revealed from within the material, mirroring the process Preece undertakes by hand as she carves the handle of a cup, a mug or a saucepan from plaster.

In contrast to the precise lines of the porcelain forms, the defining edges of the items on this table's surface are blurred. The boundary between knife and tabletop is unclear; they appear to melt into one another. This permeability between object and environment echoes the movement of material between states.

Within this domestic scene, among these familiar objects, the people are absent. The table bears witness to the stirring of tea, the shared meal. These pure and unblemished porcelain forms – the saucepan, the mug, the bowls - have never been sullied by human use. And yet, the exhibits are luminous with the life of their maker; her perceptual experience. Stripped of context or commentary, they are both intimate and transcendent. From the particular to the universal, from the prosaic to the poetic, Preece's work invites us to engage with familiar objects anew. In so doing, we journey through our own experience, awake to the space within our own lives.

We are invited to give the works in this exhibition the unhurried travel of our full attention, our precious, unbroken time. In doing so we let the beautiful light fall on the unseen and overlooked in an intense and silent grace.

ⁱ Kagge, Erling. *Silence in the Age of Noise*. Viking, 2017