

'The passage from the 'solid' to 'liquid' phase of modernity: that is, into a condition in which social forms [. . .] can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set. Forms, whether already present or only adumbrated, are unlikely to be given enough time to solidify, and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies because of their short life expectation:' Liquid Times: Zygmunt Bauman.(1)

'Heaven knows where that striving might lead us if our affections had not had a trick of twining round those old inferior things.' *Maggie Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot.*(2)

Following on from her exhibition, *Material Presence* (2018), Zoe Preece was awarded a Production Grant by Arts Council Wales in 2019. This was intended to develop her practice by bringing together her prior experience of porcelain, fluxing materials and American black walnut wood with digital technologies (3D scanning and CNC milling) and more complex plaster model and mould making processes. Her exhibition, *In Reverence*, at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, is the culmination of this research.(3)

In Reverence is situated in a spacious, high-ceilinged gallery at the end of a mezzanine balcony lined with examples from the history of porcelain: hand painted and gilded, exquisite, entertaining and exuberant, and always congenial. Entering the gallery, however, all this falls away except porcelain's whiteness. 'White', Baudrillard writes, 'remains largely pre-eminent in the 'organic' realm: bathrooms, kitchens, sheets, linen – anything that is bound up with the body and its immediate extensions has for generations been the domain of white.(4) Preece's porcelain pieces are ghostlike. Their whiteness and stillness evoke what is absent: the immaterial, the oneiric, the sensory memory. We clutch at familiar clues to contemplate this absence: light passing through the holes of a colander or a quality of buttery congealment. With their play on quiddity, ubiquity and habituation, these objects remind us to feel our way back to the humble objects overlooked in the home as well as the unacknowledged labour that puts them to work.

In our age of uncertainty and liquid modernity as described by Zygmunt Bauman, Preece presses the pause button, momentarily solidifying for us our strong connection to the domestic. In this sense there is a political element to Preece's work, yet more than this, it is overwhelmingly poetic, aesthetic and acutely personal.

STILL LIFE

Definitions of still life depend on the ideological, art historical and literary criticism that appropriates it. Martha Buskirk, in her discussion on medium and materiality in contemporary still life, explores how it has been transformed in ways that bring out cultural, metaphorical and phenomenological associations.(5) To term Preece's exhibition a form of still life is merely to acknowledge her debt to a genre that originated with a certain sparsity in classical *xenia* and rhapsography and matured in the seventeenth century *monochrome banquetjes*.(6) Yet this exhibition is, strictly speaking, neither still life nor installation, but hovers somewhere in between in what Bachelard terms, a 'cell of intimacy'.(7)

As in the Northern still life tradition and its more recent manifestations – Meret Oppenheim's *Object* (1936), Daniel Spoerri's 'picture traps' of the 1960s, Laura Provost's *Wantee* (2013) and Rachel Whiteread's *Poltergeist* (2021) – Preece retains the true size of her objects; it is their anchor to the world. Here, a colander, casseroles, platters and tools are on display, positioned at waist height or eye level, either artfully strewn, singled out or marshalled in rows. These pieces do not work and have no function. Instead, *re*-presentation is their work achieved through transformation, displacement and defamiliarisation. Preece's objects are ambiguous, contradictory and unsettling yet also sublime, material and ethereal. Though not quite objects (nameable, classifiable, useable), they are also not quite 'things' (unnamed, unclassified, useless), neither are they non-things – Villém Flusser defines these as occupying 'grey areas' between material and non-materiality.(8) They are not the same as the quotidian mass-produced objects they reference though their material and means of fabrication are the same. They are works of art – art at work. The work they do is to produce a sense of stillness that

enables meditation and contemplation – a sense of being in the moment. As Mark Doty notes of a still life painting by seventeenth century Dutch painter, Osias Beert, 'these things form not a single whole but a concert, a community of separate presences'.(9)

'One reason why still life enables us to read the world differently is that it frequently chooses subject matter so ordinary that it starts by inviting us to see it as we always do', writes Rosemary Lloyd of the literary still life.(10) Preece's referencing of the still life tradition also grows out of her reading which enables her to contextualise and pay attention to contemporary states of being and beholding. This, in a world where tactile experience of handling and working with stuff, is for many, less practiced, habitual than in the past. As Flusser also writes: 'The environment is becoming ever softer, more nebulous, more ghostly, and to find one's way around it one has to take this spectral nature as a starting-point.'(11)

SEEKING A MOORING IN LIQUID TIMES

Object-oriented philosopher, Graham Harman, criticises what he terms as 'overmining' methods of analysis, dialectics and relationality in the categorisation of objects for the sake of finding 'ultimate elements'.(12) Almost half a century ago, French author, Georges Perec, in his essay 'Notes Concerning the Objects that are on my Work-table' (1974), also questioned such methods in his absurdist and excessive, but never exhaustive, listing.(13) Characteristic of contemporary, liquified postmodernity is the tendency to dissolve categories. Thus, Aristotle's extra-linguistic categories of qualities are now understood to be more fluid.(14) Heidegger's distinction between object and thing, and the debates it has generated, are particularly pertinent to Preece's works which resist precise description and nomenclature. They are liquid made solid made liquid again in imaginative interpretation. There is also sufficient difference between her originating objects – their feel or consistency, their arrangements, orientations and regulation, what they contained, cut, strained or framed –and Preece's works of art, which sets out to defamiliarise them. It is this feature that enables viewers to experience those habitual objects in new ways, oneirically and sensuously. In this respect at least, Preece's work is able to be described; it is of its time, just as Morandi's or Spoerri's were of theirs. All belong to a category of practice that seeks a relation between art and life.

Preece's objects rely not so much on their agency, a contested idea in any case, but on what we, the viewers, 'bring to the table'. They work liminally, drawing us from the material real to the sensory, reflective, and even rhapsodic. Seduction is at play through their material and metaphorical language of liquification, subtraction, merging, tearing and wearing down. They also depend for their affectiveness on the ways in which they are presented, lighting and management of shadow playing a significant part. The exhibition is a cultural convention after all, a form of staging. The parameters prescribe and anticipate our engagement.

I will now take the liberty of proposing some categories of my own though I do so in the expectation that, like any mooring in liquid times, they will bump, slide and leak into one another.

CATEGORIES

Petrified objects – '*Solutions containing silicates, carbonates, iron or other minerals seep into the gaps and spaces between the cells, first encasing the cells and eventually replacing the cells themselves.*'(15.)

Preece's petrified objects are porcelain lidded storage jars, a casserole, a saucepan, a colander, a small bowl and a measuring jug. They are simulacrum, mimetic copies, *re*-presentations of the real in frozen form, and pure white as if drained of life. All traces of craftwork have been removed. Instead, craft is exceeded by making it invisible, just as domestic toil and care are too. They are perfect, but useless, except for their work as art which is to direct us somewhere beyond themselves. Without stain or stickiness or scratch, these objects are inert. The small bowl contains her trademark spoon, its content melted by heat and frozen in time, caught between pour and drip. All these petrified objects are exhibited on small individual shelves, isolated and alone, their profiles blending into the whiteness behind. The dual shadows cast beneath make for ghostly plinths, ephemeral and barely noticeable, yet supporting monuments in reverence to forgotten labour.

Transitional Objects – '*The terms 'transitional object' and 'transitional phenomena' [are] for designation of the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear.*'(16.)

Porcelain platters and pots are arranged on a trestle table – artlessly. Preece uses the analogy of glacial to describe the slow process of accrual through which her forms move from one to the next – each a letting go of the former. Winnicott's 'transitional object' describes the attachment we have to habitual objects, and the need for separation in order to see them as if for the first time. With this in mind, the artist takes risks with her platters and pots, defamiliarising them by abandoning the convention of smooth and tidy edges. Process becomes more evident here, failed experiments more useful. Spares are either left in place intended or eased off. This all hints at a language of disorder, of abandoned objects and spillage. 'When still life of the table sounds the theme of disorder, asymmetry of the sexes is an important factor in the emotional nuancing of the scene' writes Norman Bryson.(17)

Something else occurs too, a synaesthetic coalescence of the originating object and the remembered sensation of the viscous and liquid fluids associated with them, their stirring, sipping or spooning. 'Why is a feel oyster an egg stir.' Gertrude Stein, writes in 'Tender Buttons', her stream of consciousness poem of 1914. Preece's intentions are also reminiscent of the soft and collapsed sculptures of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, the edible/lickable sculpture of Janine Antoni, and the ceramics of Livia Marin. Agglomeration rather than table setting generates another conflation, this time between the domestic and the museological. The brittle and frangible qualities of porcelain are used as material metaphor for frailty – human in the context of the domestic, and systematic in the context of the museological, both of which, suggests Peter Schwenger in *The Tears of Things*, incur melancholy.(18)

Reductive Objects – '*[Michelangelo] took up a chisel in his left hand, with a little of the marble-dust that lay upon the planks of the staging, and then, beginning to strike lightly with the chisel, let fall the dust little by little, nor changed the nose a whit from what it was before.*'(19)

Covid-19 lockdown saw everything familiar taken away – routine, access to the studio, materials and equipment. Finding herself trapped inside, Preece begins to carve lumps of porcelain on her kitchen table. The objects she makes are 'trapped' inside. Carving is a reductive, low-tech technique which Preece follows by paring, sanding and smoothing, creating 'superfluous' waste for repurposing later. She liberates the tools of her trade, her fettling knives and paintbrushes. It is as if, in working reductively and mimetically, she rediscovers for herself the poignancy of these mundane objects. The tools remain partially encased however and this, as well as their re-materialisation, render them unworkable and found wanting. Heidegger reminds us in his chapters on the 'being of entities' and their 'worldly character' that a break in 'the everydayness of Being-in-the-world', discloses this 'equipment' and makes it 'conspicuous'. That is, 'the ready to hand [is] deprived of its worldhood so that Being-just-present-at-hand comes to the fore'.(20) Laid out in a row as representations, it is unclear whether Preece's tool-things are emerging or retreating. Something similar happens in the tool drawings of Jim Dine.(21)

Simulacra – '*It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.*'(22)

Made from American black walnut, a hard wood, Preece's furniture sculptures are combinations of the hand-made (made in collaboration with furniture maker, Jennifer Finnegan) and CNC (Computer Numerically Controlled) 3D scanning and milling technologies (executed with the support of Fablab, Cardiff Metropolitan University). Here Preece cedes control to the technology and the qualities of the material, which, like porcelain has its own memory. For example, after milling, the wood warps slightly, making itself comfortable. For Preece, these furniture pieces close the gap between digital technologies and craft.

We are invited to walk between a table on which a tablecloth is laid, a chair with a cushion that has been sat on, another chair with folded clothing and a stool with folded tea towels. The upturned book on the tablecloth has wood swirls that mirror two round stains left by two absent cups, an imitation of the overlooked. 'There is a wonderfully felicitous phrase, the 'blindingly obvious' writes Daniel Miller in *Stuff*, 'when something is sufficiently evident it can reach a point at which we are blinded to its presence, rather than reminded of its presence.'(23) Clothing, cushion, cloths and book have literally become 'part of the furniture'; habitual objects 'relax' and 'sink into themselves' as Bill Brown remarks.(24) The furniture pieces make no real claim to be trompe

l'oeil. They are mimetic only as much as the technology allows. So it is that we see only the skin of the object, no undercuts, no interior gloom. This absence of shadow draws attention to the importance of shadow elsewhere in the exhibition. Here, it is its absence that is important, it makes the objects uncanny.

Waste – 'The hand consumes culture and transforms it into waste.'(25)

Waste, in Preece's exhibition, takes two forms: spares and debris. Sparer (the excess clay wall around the pouring cavity of a slip mould) have been retained on vessels after moulds were drained leaving a dripped edge. The platters, on the other hand, have had their spares torn off which leaves a deckled edge. These spares have been hung together on the wall like mirror frames, but tired and limp. They point to the waste of the unacknowledged life of domestic drudgery. Debris, on the other hand, is the remains of the carving process, the negative of the tool's positive. It takes the form of shavings, peelings, granules and dust. Waste, and its redemption, is both material and subject in Preece's work. It is put to work as art by being made to masquerade as something else: sugar or peelings but also as itself, waste. There is undoubtedly a poetic aesthetic at work here, not dissimilar from the photographs of Keith Arnatt or work of contemporary activist artists that poeticise the discarded. This, then, is not an aesthetics of the abject, but a poetic aesthetics that values humility and quiet beauty. Something lowly is moved centre stage and endowed with value.

There is a strong authorial voice at work in this exhibition, confident in what it intends to convey accompanied by the technical and curatorial mastery required to do so. Memory of the humble and overlooked is made manifest in these objects and their display. Preece seeks out the distinctive in the repetitive, and the sensuous and meaningful in the overlooked. In the manner in which she practices she embodies the invisible and undervalued work undertaken by women, a political move. Likewise, her objects are made from the same material and means of manufacture as the ubiquitous domestic objects she references. Sometimes the real and the art are almost indistinguishable, at other times art reminds us of the invisible real in life. Preece talks about her work as being an offering, something for her viewers to take away with them, to feel and think about.

End Notes

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