

MOUSSE

MOUSSE 24 ~ Cathy Wilkes

THE VANTAGE POINT OF BEING ALIVE

BY KIRSTY BELL

Northern Irish artist Cathy Wilkes creates installations that are visual rebuses: everyday objects – violently prosaic ones – are ensnared in surreal compositions involving mannequins that seem to serve as the artist's avatars. These scenes, as Kirsty Bell notes, trigger moments of illumination – making “some kind of cosmic sense” – in the viewer's mind, though the reason why can't be put into words. As in the Doris Lessing novel *The Golden Notebook*, it is the indeterminacy of the triad “plan, shape and intention” that makes her work so deeply intriguing and so conducive to reflection.



SHE'S PREGNANT AGAIN

“I fought with a feeling that always takes hold of me after one of these exchanges: unreality, as if the substance of my self were thinning and dissolving. (...) I shall write down, as truthfully as I can, every stage of a day. Tomorrow”. In the next twenty odd pages of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, the writer protagonist, Anna, writes a highly detailed record, not only the activities of her day, but also the thoughts that determine them, and the trains of thought behind those thoughts. The practical crosses over with the emotional, the biological with the intellectual, being a writer, mother, lover, friend, employee, political activist. These roles shift seamlessly from one to the other, as she slips in and out of other peoples' lives, with all the various subtle internal adjustments that this requires. At the end of this extensive, detailed description, Anna, dissatisfied, crosses it all out, replacing it with a few concise lines that reduce the day to a neutral factual paragraph beginning: “A normal day...” and ending “...I must pull myself together”.

Cathy Wilkes' work resists concise description, the normal day and pulling oneself together; the banal, trivial, conflicting substances of the normal day are as intrinsic to its material and form as the shift thought patterns behind them. There are no hard and fast divisions between artistic concerns and functional usage, between experiences as a painter, sculptor, mother, carer, consumer, and there is no censorship of unsuitable material. The most ordinary, along with the most specific of objects, all have a part to play in her fixed but loose-seeming assemblages, like floor-bound collages that yoke the everyday to the otherworldly. Some of the objects she introduces are confounding due to their menial nature or bald functionality (a toilet, a sink, an industrial drill), or seem blatant in their explicit relation to home and children (baby bottles, a brand new pram), or jarring in the literal associations their labels elicit in this unconventional context (empty jars of Bonne Maman jam.) Many of the items seem out of place, as if borrowed from one of the other facets of the artist's life. In fact,

Untitled, 2010.
Courtesy:
Raucci/
Santamaria
Gallery, Naples.
Photo: E. Velo.

a point by point breakdown of one of Wilkes' works may actually begin to resemble Lessing's own jumbling stream of consciousness. The 2005 installation *She's Pregnant Again*, for instance, lists the following as its media: televisions (2), aluminium trays, water, petrol, pram, sink, towel, phone, salad bowls, mirror, jar, battery, saucer, shoe, fabric, thread, paintings (4).

Of course this in itself is not new. From Duchamp to Schwitters, or Joseph Cornell to Isa Genzken, everyday materials have been being harnessed into the service of art by many artists for many years. Their ubiquity is a given. So what is it that makes Wilkes' installations so startling? There is a distinct vulnerability, palpable in earlier works with their contingent relationships between shoddy sun loungers and jigsaw puzzle fragments (*Psychologist*, 2001), that has been amplified over the years. In *She's Pregnant Again*, shown in the 2005 Venice Biennial's Scottish Pavilion, un-modulated objects from "real life", freshly shop bought and unsoiled by use, crop up amidst small abstract paintings hung on the walls. The two television screens turn away from each other like a couple in the midst of a dispute. A pram is wedged between them. An almost empty jar of Bonne Maman apricot jam sits on top of one of the TVs. It's like kitchen sink domestic drama being played out before us, with the furnishings taking the leading roles, along with all the random accoutrements of mobile phones, salad bowls, shoes and saucers. Wilkes is exceptional in her willingness to allow these apparently incidental features – the plastic hardware of domestic life and the specific set of objects that start to accumulate as soon as you have a baby – be absorbed into and play a defining role in her work. Perhaps it is worth taking another look at these things that furnish our lives, but are so taken for granted as to be almost invisible? It is a bold position to take, though disconcerting to realize that, though over thirty years have passed since Mary Kelly displayed her son's dirty diapers in *Post-Partum Document*, it is still unsettling to find such elements on show and allowed a wider meaning.

An ongoing patterning, organizing and instilling of objects with a significance outside of their daily usage is at work here. Objects become implicated through a process of substitution, as Wilkes uses whatever is close at hand as a place holder while she's laying something out, but the substitutes invariably end up generating their own significance and becoming essential to the work's constellation. The accidental becomes the highly sensitized catalyst, and objects are allowed to possess a simultaneity of meaning and being that corresponds to that of the artist herself.



Above – *I Give You All My Money*, 2008. Installation view, Tate Britain, London, 2008. Courtesy: the artist and The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow.

Bottom – *The Sea of Galilee*, 2009. Installation view, Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin, 2009. Courtesy: Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin. Photo: Berndt Borchardt.



ABSTRACT RESISTANCE

The figure that was clearly implied by installations such as *She's Pregnant Again* became actual, a short time after in *Non-Verbal*, a re-working of the same piece. Now, two shop dummies, dressed in only a pair of tights or a flimsy cardigan, appeared amongst the other accoutrements. The delicate, washy paintings previously hung on the walls were now affixed to the mannequins' faces. A violent conflation of looking and being looked at, of conflicting roles as woman and artist, of subject and object, occurs as the audience looking at the painting is almost mirrored by the woman it masks. Like bold exclamations, the paintings replace spoken expression, they are essentially "non-verbal".

Mannequins have appeared in many subsequent pieces, masked by a variety of domestic appendages hanging in front of their faces (teacups, frying pans, cow bells) or their whole head encased by a plastic bird cage, while leaning casually or sitting cross-legged on a free-standing toilet. Though their figuration casts them inevitably as avatars of the artist herself, they occupy the installations with the same casual assumption as the accumulated detritus around them, inviting allegorical extrapolation on the one hand, while at the same time ridiculing it with their abstruseness and literal, blank obviousness.

In Wilkes' recent installation (*Untitled*, 2010) for the Walker Art Center's exhibition "Abstract Resistance", the mannequin appears again, this time sitting elegantly on the floor, her red-painted arms holding an infant mannequin in knitted cap, while her face is smeared with mud, eyes blacked out and a long, fat ham-pink tongue lolls out of her mouth. Behind her, a full-sized figure of a woman lies on the floor, handmade by the artist using Adobe technique of clay, sand and water mixture with dung and straw. In the center is a light-industrial conveyor belt, with three large, looping almost spherical constructions of fine wood stems and flimsy fabric sitting on it, flanked on either side by fish tank-like vitrines on the floor, smeared with porridge, now dried out. Beside one vitrine is a wooden Noah's Ark complete with carved toy animals, partially smothered by a cloud-like tangle of wire. Beside this are a number of archaic-looking tools, the handles of some of which are embedded in a crumbling grey slab.

Avoiding the verticality of previous, more upright installations with standing figures or ladders, this piece demands a reorientation from the viewer, by locating the focus of action on the floor. This shift of the normal viewing position and combination of various scales, regardless of their visibility, with the tiniest of things placed on the floor alongside the very large ones, already sets demands, refusing to accommodate the spectator's ease. At the same time, it asserts a non-hierarchical privileging of the trivial alongside the weighty, read-



justing expectations of just where significance may lie. Thrown off guard, the viewer peers down at this gravity-bound scenario, inevitably tempted to sketch an elaborate allegorical narrative to make sense of its disparate elements. The Noah's Ark invites a biblical tone. Do these figures stand for Madonna and Child? Or do the graceful cane constructions point rather to an ethereal cosmos? Is it an allegory of creativity, as the tools and conveyor belt, and maybe even the baby itself could suggest? The liberal daubings of porridge, like some primordial matter, and the wild tangles of wire estrange the elements from their common origins, involving them instead in a bizarre ritualistic-like arrangement, weighting them down through contamination. The fish tanks are soiled, the tools are emerging from an oozing plaster casing and the mannequins have been quite literally defaced, their generic significance altered into some more primal expressiveness, while the Adobe figure's origins are themselves the primordial gunk. The possible meanings ascribed to these temporary and instable vehicles bind them in an elaborate, over-determined staging.

Fittingly, for its part in this group exhibition, the work achieves a taut straddle, with one ear bending to the narrative pull of figuration, and the other to the analytical charm of abstraction. Though undeniably expressive, it is also categorically resistant to placement on either side of the spectrum.



Top - *The Sea of Galilee*, 2009. Installation view at Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin, 2009. Courtesy: Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin. Photo: Berndt Borchardt.

Above - *Moons*, 2004. Installation view, Switch Space, Glasgow 2004. Courtesy: the artist and The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow. Photo: Ruth Clark Photography.



Above - *Mr. So and So*, 2001. Installation view, Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin, 2001. Courtesy: Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin. Photo: Martin Eberle.



Right - *We Are Pro Choice*, 2008. Installation view, Milton Keynes Gallery, Milton Keynes, 2008. Courtesy: the Artist and The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow.

MUMMY'S HERE

More abstract but just as resistant is the piece Cathy Wilkes made for Studio Voltaire in London in 2009. Though its title, *Mummy's Here*, introduces an unequivocal narrative slant, its more formal floor-bound geometric patterning and lack of unintegrated objects (no toilets, prams or mannequins here) lend it an internal cohesiveness. It seems to suggest a concentrated formal analysis of something: production? thought? perception? Three glass porridge-smear vitrines and two cane spheres sit on the floor. A number of rectangular painting-like reliefs in red, blue and green are arranged flat on the floor before them, with various colour-coded objects embedded in their surfaces: soft toys in Liberty prints, a ping-pong bat, wooden balls, shards of broken glass. A wooden children's toy in one vitrine, with coloured discs stacked in descending scale to form a cone, looks like an archaic instrument of scientific investigation. Quiet, with a rich density of allusion, this organization throws up thoughts about the intensity of looking, of correspondences, of the object/painting dichotomy. Although not as overtly expressive as the other works, it is just as non-verbal, its forms creating an intense frisson, but its specificity shrouded. The appearance of things is up for grabs; looking and thinking are, it seems, not always the same.

Wilkes described to me her interest in the "vantage point of being alive". This is what enables such an unrestrained porousness, allowing the various aspects of her life to flow readily into her work. And this is what allows a work like this to seem to crystallise in an undefined but intense significance that can't quite be put into words. The vantage point of being alive is not permanent, it changes continuously and is entirely dependent on other, un-cerebral parts of a daily life, but it allows for certain sudden moments of clarity, where a vision of disparate elements unexpectedly seems to make some kind of cosmic sense.

Wilkes' reluctance to spell out precise meanings leads me to another quote by Doris Lessing. Ten years after the initial publication of *The Golden Notebook* in 1962, Lessing described how surprised she was that readers had found such different themes in the book, as if it was several different books in one. "The book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion", she concluded, "only when its plan and shape and intention are not understood, because that moment of seeing the shape and plan and intention is also the moment when there isn't anything more to be got out of it". In refusing to pin down her own shape, plan and intention, Wilkes lays her works open for the curious mind.