

From Forgotten Discards, a Wealth of Memories



An installation view of the Irish artist Cathy Wilkes's haunting show at MoMA PS1.
Pablo Enriquez/MoMA PS1

By Jason Farago Nov. 8, 2017

Five hundred years ago, in his “Book of the Courtier,” the Italian nobleman Baldassare Castiglione set out rules for behavior that had a profound influence on a newly emerging kind of humanistic artist. Skill was necessary, yes, but a Renaissance man — the gendered designation went without saying — should aspire to paint with “sprezzatura,” an easy perfection sometimes rendered in English as “nonchalance.” Sprezzatura, for Castiglione, was a special kind of mastery, “which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless.” It wasn’t enough, for a Renaissance man, to create something beautiful. The real test was to make it look as if you hadn’t tried.

This has been an ambition of artists for centuries, but not for the Glasgow-based Irish sculptor and painter Cathy Wilkes — influential among her peers but too little known here — whose mastery takes precisely the opposite tack. Her art is an art of anti-sprezzatura: manifest effort and extreme care, all to create things that appear unheeded or disposable.

At MoMA PS1 in Queens, Ms. Wilkes is the subject of a delicate, downcast exhibition that unites uncanny cloth sculptures and scumbled paintings with large doses of junk. Do not go expecting fireworks; her tools can be as unprepossessing as a tea-ringed saucer, a discolored hatbox, an unfixed sink or a case of vegetable peelers. Yet industriously reworked and gathered into disarming displays and tableaux, these nothing-special sources limn the biggest themes of love, fear, loss, mourning, childhood and even divine grace. Domestic but not tender, this show is an emotional roundhouse in an art world that can sometimes seem as if it forgot how to feel.



Soiled dishes and empty jars are among the domestic objects Ms. Wilkes uses in her art.
Pablo Enriquez/MoMA PS1

Ms. Wilkes was born in 1966 in Belfast. She moved when young to Scotland, where she attended the Glasgow School of Art: the stalwart institution that has produced the bulk of Britain's most important contemporary artists, from Simon Starling and Lucy Skaer to Martin Boyce and Karla Black. She soon began integrating objects from her home and studio, such

as drapes, clothing and jars of jam or porridge, into spatial environments in pristine galleries. Almost always, the fabrics were worn, stained or frayed; the jars would still be coated with food residue.

Those and other similarly blemished found objects — a half-used vial of lip gloss, a remote control for a forgotten appliance — are displayed with the care once afforded saintly relics, and positioned among murky, often gloomy abstract paintings and much more moving figurative sculptures, without regard to chronology. A papier-mâché statue of an armless, knock-kneed youth, wearing a linen apron, stands in front of dried heather from rural Scotland that lies strewn on the floor, while weathered plates and mugs are stacked against the wall. A pair of half-dressed mannequins, first seen in her 2005 Glasgow exhibition “Non Verbal,” and modified since, stands behind a rusted metal box — a sort of Judd mockery — in which you’ll find a frayed car seat cushion, a crumpled orange shirt and a used makeup canister.

These and other installations have some surface parallels with the sculpture of Cady Noland or Isa Genzken, though those artists’ fashion-conversant cynicism is miles from Ms. Wilkes’s baleful, historically minded sincerity. Here, stains, rust and rips humanize the impassive mannequins, and the frail, armless figure, of indeterminate gender, could have lived a thousand years ago. A more relevant antecedent may be the psychologically intricate art of Louise Bourgeois, on view concurrently at the MoMA mother ship, though Ms. Wilkes takes a less autobiographical, more open-ended approach than Bourgeois did.

Her most moving works are sculptures made of fabric or resin, begun around 2011, which depict stunted and vulnerable figures, often children, alone or in family groups. In an untitled cluster of three from 2012, perhaps a riff on the Holy Family, a child whose soft joints and frayed exterior recall a rag doll’s is crouching to wipe the face of a baby, while an older child, also shabby and scruffy, stands before a wash basin. A later sculpture of a single child, with spindly legs, wears a frayed green shift decorated with an Irish shamrock, but he or she appears fearful, defenseless, with eyes that are no more than awl marks.



Some of the mixed-media figures Ms. Wilkes has sculpted and then arranged in family vignettes. Pablo Enriquez/MoMA PS1

In the installation “Untitled (Possil, at Last)” first seen at the 2013 Venice Biennale — its title refers to an old Glasgow pottery factory — a mannequin of a drunken father squats in front of two children, amid stones, old beer bottles and pottery shards. The children seem more resigned than disturbed.

What seems paramount for Ms. Wilkes is that objects in an art gallery — whether soft sculptures or simple detritus — should register two ways at once: as exactly what they are, and as triggers for memories, fantasies, fears. That double charge is emphasized via an unpretentious mode of display: Paintings (sometimes nothing more than a few stains on untreated canvas) are hung far below eye level. Numerous fragile works, including all the sculptures of children, rest on the floor.

This approach has clearly posed a challenge to PS1, and to manage matters, the museum lets only 35 visitors at a time into the show’s principal suite of galleries, and only 10 into a smaller one. That’s no problem in itself, but the museum has

not repaid visitors for the wait time by trusting them to view Ms. Wilkes's art in peace. When I visited last weekend, the guards were nervously shunting visitors away from the floor-based works. Elsewhere, a guard is stationed next to a full-scale fabric mannequin, which is installed in a narrow hallway and thus can be seen only from a distance. Ms. Wilkes wants this presentation to feel unassuming, but at PS1, it can feel locked down.

I hope, over the course of this show's four-month run, that visitors and guards alike will relax around these awkward, melancholy, important works of art, and will display the same courage that Ms. Wilkes has shown by installing them so vulnerably. What gives her sculptures such force is not merely the thematic evocations of loss and distance, but also the generosity with which she presents them. True mastery, she suggests, lies in letting anxieties go.