

Still Lives

“I take it that any conscious configuration of objects tells a story. In fact this is something I’ve believed for a very long time...that any collection of objects was an ambiguously bounded unit that told a particular story, and it was by setting the boundaries that the story was told.”

Susan Hiller¹

Lauren Healey’s recent installation *Still Lives* gathers together just such a collection of objects, bounded by the gallery space and waiting to reveal many possible narratives. These objects have been accumulated during her frequent visits to a local flea market, in the glass canopied space of Tynemouth’s partially restored Victorian railway station. Here Healey sifts through piles of ephemera: photographs, postcards, letters, scraps of fabric and odd garments – and selects those which are to be “rescued”. Re-homed and re-made, these objects begin a new cycle in their existence, moving from the personal sphere (where they had spent a great deal of time) through the commercial sphere of the flea market and into the public sphere as works of art.

Healey talks of her selection process as being intuitive and closely connected to the everyday. She has a preference for the mundane, and is drawn to objects and images which have a generic quality. The people and places in the photographs are not extraordinary, the lines of writing on the back of postcards do not tell of daring adventures or dramatic events. In fact many of the objects which surface in Healey’s installations could have belonged to almost anybody who lived in the UK during the first half of the twentieth century. This quality of everydayness means that the unrecognisable images, and unremarkable writings become separated from the things they refer to, they are no longer simply indexical. Their passage through time has made their physicality their defining characteristic, for example the curling corners, faded edges and scratched surface of a photograph assumes an equal, if not greater importance than the image itself. Their original communicative purpose is overtaken by their talismanic properties, they signal the everyday exoticism of the past.

Such remnants are predominantly sourced by stall holders from house clearances. They represent what remains after a life has ended. This is the stuff that has slipped through the filtering process which takes place after a death, when friends and relatives skim off the bits and pieces which retain memories for them. These pieces gone, what are left behind are objects that have lost their referent, there is no-one left who remembers their significance. However the pieces in Healey’s art works do not feel like empty objects, they retain a charge, they are a potential catalyst for new stories to be generated or a conduit through which our own stories can be accessed.

The quote that begins this piece of writing is from Susan Hiller, an artist who was originally trained as an anthropologist, a background which has informed her understanding of the heady associations embedded in material culture. For Hiller the story telling potential of a collection of objects is activated by “setting the boundaries”, a process of negotiation which is central to Healey’s practice. Boundaries in Healey’s work are continually negotiable, they shift, they are permeable, they unravel. Physically the collection of objects and interventions that comprise the installation *Still Lives* are bounded by the gallery space and therefore become activated in relation to one another within that space. However, under Healey’s influence the walls which define the gallery become an unstable membrane: she sinks photographs into the walls, carves out patterns and makes drawings which escape the confines of the gallery’s picture rail – heading skywards. This tactic means that Healey maintains the feeling that the installation is still “in process” - drawings and carvings are

unfinished, papers and photographs appear to shift their positions on the floor – and that different objects could be blown in from the street or find their way in through these permeable walls would seem to be a possibility. Her refusal to settle these boundaries means that narrative cannot be created as a straight line, instead it has to be drawn together, picked out from a constellation of possible objects and possible stories.

So far this essay has focused on the objects selected by Healey and their meanings, however just as central to the work as these objects are the spaces in between. Healey describes these spaces as being like “pauses in music”², they could also be seen in Derridian terms, as similar to white spaces around lettering and text. It is these spaces, the areas of nothingness, of absence, which are at first invisible but are integral to the construction of meaning. Absence is of course a major theme in Healey’s work, the installation feels like a domestic room which the inhabitants have left, or been removed from, quickly, perhaps forcefully. Healey’s choice of materials and processes also speak of this absence: Photographs and found photographs in particular, are associated, most famously by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* with signalling the uncanny absence of their subjects. Drawing too, is thought to originate through absence and as a marker of loss, there are many historical works called the *Origin of Drawing* which depict a Corinthian young woman Dibutades, who faced with her lover’s imminent departure, traces the silhouetted shadow of his profile onto her wall. The carvings in which Healey maps out patterns associated with doilies, lace curtains or wall paper are inversely related to drawing, these pieces which have physically scarred the space could also be read as acts of radical absence.

Finally with this play between object and space, presence and absence, it seems appropriate that Healey should have developed the recurring motif of official stamps in her work. Rather than postage stamps (although these are featured) I am referring to Healey’s magpie-ing of documents containing official stamps, these might be stamps that show a payment has been received, or that paperwork is in order, or has expired. Stamps although antiquated are still used today in many ways as a marker of physical presence - think of the still prevalent use of the passport stamp proving your presence in at a certain time in a certain place. An unsettling counterpoint to these stamps is the inclusion of slips of paper scattered on the floor, from the 1920s which were used to “officially” record the height and weight of their owner. One of them reads 10st 13lbs and 12 ozs, an uncanny evocation of the physical body which is now profoundly absent, providing a powerful expression of the intertwining of physicality, trace and absence which plays throughout Healey’s work.

Rosemary Shirley, 2008.

¹ Hiller, Susan, *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, ed. Barbara Einzig, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996. p.227

² Conversation with the artist July 2008

Still Lives was at Fold Gallery, Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria, 27th June – 19th July 2008

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