

## *The Mulch*

Rebecca Ackroyd

April 27 – June 15, 2018

Opening Friday, April 27, 6–9PM

A friend recounted being in a tutorial at art school with an esteemed professor. They were looking at a Cindy Sherman, from the *Untitled Movie Stills* series. The subject was a woman, her back turned from the camera, standing by an empty roadside beside a small carry case. The professor asked if the case looked warm. My friend was puzzled, but started to look closer at the case - yeah, he thought, maybe it was warm. Maybe, thinking of that glow you get when people open chests in the movies - there was something warm inside it. Maybe, given the Noirish, Cold War stylings of the image (turned away from the viewer, the subject is inscrutable as a spy), something radioactive. Perhaps she's going to hand over these hot goods, that's why she's on the road: on the run.

The professor paused. 'I asked if it looked worn', he clarified. Not warm. And the tutorial went on.

I still like my friend's speculation better. Sometimes, the stories we tell, the interpretations we offer, when we don't get something, when we don't have all the codes and the keys - when something remains unknown, locked-up, hidden, are the best ones, the most expansive, the ones that take us further.

When I go to talk to Rebecca Ackroyd in her studio she tells me she doesn't want me to map out her thinking, nor for the work she's making this year to be decoded, explained, interpreted within an inch of its life. Recent political events, she says - the prospect of Brexit, its attendant flurry of reactionary posturing and violence, the rise of right-wing politics in the UK, Germany (wherever, it sometimes seems, we care to look) - made it hard to make art for a while, to know what art would be for.

Like my friend's productive mistake, Ackroyd's mind too veers towards the warm. She describes how the sculptures of reclining figures in the Berlin show will be 'basking' - like lizards in the sun. In the past she sculpted figures that were half-human, half stove pipe, deep charred hearths in place of bellies. Those works, I think, were part of an exploration of some idea of home (per the popular Great War song, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, the hearth being a long-established folk synonym for the dwelling, as well as a political rhetoric of the nation). But in 2018, I think her creations inhabit the street. She casts from door shutters now (*Carriers*, she calls the series): the sort of exclusionary, protective, oddly rhythmic structures that punctuate every walk, however short, in the area of London where she works and I live. In Peres Projects, Ackroyd tells me, she wants to build a long wall up to the ceiling, making the space into a runway, or a road.

The home fires may be burning (a 2017 show which Ackroyd describes as something like an exorcism was titled *House Fire*), but in the street's open terrain, new ones are erupting too. In the studio, Ackroyd shows me low, ovoid wire mesh sculptures, shell-like somehow, plastered over with print outs of flames from the internet. Have you ever tried to draw a fire, or to paint one? Ackroyd doesn't care for the challenge: why paint a thing when you can print it off, slap it on? Next question. Pick it up. Move on.

Public discourse today is clustered around images of (im)mobility – trade routes, borders, walls and crossings, agencies switching cities, boats sinking. The fires I see have a portable quality, like oversize luggage. Their being shell-like is part of this portability too. Hermit crabs steal shells, inhabit them until they find another. Like pebbles, you want to pick

shells up, carry them around; then you find them in your pocket when you get home and wonder whether to keep them, where they should live.

The landscape Ackroyd creates is rife with this kind of displacement, that openly confronts what belongs where, what has the right to inhabit one space rather than another. Another sculpture she shows me is a carcass of ribs, picked or bleached clean, like something from an apocalyptic Western set. The body as a structure, architecture as a body, has been a recurrent theme for this artist (see the Caryatids on steroids she showed variously in London across 2016). Whatever beast or body this chest belonged to, it makes a poor home but stills makes a desperate kind of shelter: just the right size for a sleeping bag, a body.

In the language of pop psychology we frame “baggage” as a negative, as something, implicitly, that we want to shed. Ackroyd’s relationship with baggage is more ambivalent. The top panels of the *Carriers* are plastered with archival scraps - news cuttings, drawings, almost-ideas, abandoned plans - along with the year of their making. She calls them ‘transitional objects’, obliquely evoking a psychoanalytic register of attachments and traumatic separations. Is there a special “coded” significance to what imagery gets attached to each one, I ask? Ackroyd defers. Just to show that nothing is redundant, that everything stays and resurfaces somehow (however little you can guess its revenant form, or see it coming).

What gets excluded and included, what gets kept and what gets left, what gets in and what gets out – these are the questions that I think this work is asking, and, in a sense, they’re all questions of belonging, as well as of being. Caught in their sleek, astronautical helmets, Ackroyd’s figurative sculptures look pretty comfy - ‘basking’, after all. They’re at home. But are they inside or outside? With great, window-like gouges in their legs, blasted red interiors bared outwards, their “insides” are outside. They are weird and apart, but they are still a part of the weird landscape they lounge in. A tree left long enough will grow around a metal railing, engulf it. What kind of thing do we call the tree-railing? Hybrid, maybe. Mutant possibly. Belonging everywhere and nowhere.

Those glasses the reclining figures wear, over their helmets: I see them as snatched from Isa Genzken’s extra-terrestrial, harlequin mannequins, adaptations for the unearthly red light and whatever environment it betokens. Ackroyd tells me, in fact, they were inspired by the shades worn by Lynda Benglis in her iconic, dildo-wielding 1976 Artforum advert. It makes sense that Benglis should be a sort of genius loci in Ackroyd’s place-making – an artist, after all, utterly committed to exploring the binaries (hard/soft, masculine/feminine, epic/everyday) implicit in form. But I think also of that stray phallus, clutched in the advert like a prop. Another dislocation, another thing not quite object nor body part. And the shades which make the artist’s self-positioning both totally swaggering and utterly impenetrable.

These coal-black shades, the pulled down shutters and the closed roadside case, its mystery locked within: all these are forms of the *Mulch* which, Ackroyd tells me, will give the show its name. Inscrutably dark, but nurturing an unseen energy. Who knows where the woman by the roadside is going, but she’s going somewhere, for sure.

Matthew McLean

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