

Echo's Bones

An Essay on *Circular Holding Pattern*

An Exhibition by *Beagles & Ramsay* at *Govan Project Space*

The original French title of Michel Houellebecq's novel *Whatever* (1994) is: *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, literally translating to: *Extension of the Domain of Struggle*. Why more people don't know this is a persistent frustration of mine. Anyway, their problem. I digress. The protagonist (referred to in the book only as 'Our Hero') is a lonely office worker entangled in a programming job that pays well enough, but is slowly suffocating him. He's not had sex in two years. He cites Schopenhauer and Kant in an attempt to understand a world that doesn't seem to want him, but won't quite let him go. He engages in bouts of masturbation and nausea.

On entering *Circular Holding Pattern* at *Govan Project Space* (GPS) I am presented with a maze of upturned office chairs, impossibly erect mops, holes bored into desks, toppled tables and floor-strewn TV screens. Ubiquitous room dividers further carve up the gallery space, creating hidden corners that I'm both compelled and slightly reticent to wander amongst. There are small things too, lots of familiar shapes and colours spattered around. But something's off. Something's not quite right. Everything's too heavy or too tall, too big or too small, too silent or too loud, too straight or too still. The sensation isn't a pleasant one. It's rather, well, destabilising. A bit slapstick. A bit like if Samuel Beckett had staged *Fantasia*.¹ I'm going to have to be brave aren't I.

"Nothing you want is ever going to happen. That's the real world. Your hair isn't red. People don't walk around on stilts. Maybe somewhere you can earn a living sitting around drinking margaritas through a curly plastic straw, but in this world, you've got to turn up, log on and grind out."

Arthur Schopenhauer

¹ To be specific, I am reminded of 'Fantasia: Mickey Mouse Magic' (1991), the side-scrolling video game available on the Sega Megadrive and Sega Genesis. The game was a notoriously good-looking sequel to 'Castle of Illusion' (1991), but received extensive criticism for lacking any real depth and having poor playability.

I start to get my eye in once winding my way between the pallid workplace hues, dancing brooms, and carefully scattered office detritus. These smaller things are everywhere; parasitically orbiting around the chairs, tables and dividers, not unlike flies might upon a shit or a corpse. Jovially shaped post-it-notes bound around the wall hangings and table tops. They're rash like and slightly manic in their performance of spontaneity (an observant co-worker may well describe them as being 'wacky'!) But they're not made out of paper. The imposters on the walls are rendered through some kind of heat-dye effect, and the blotches of colour on the tables are jesmonite. Nobody has written anything on any of them.

Coffee cup forms are dotted about at the corners of the floors and tables, as if having just been popped down. But the cups themselves have gone. Instead I am faced with a rendering of negative space – a cold concrete cast of the place where once hot liquid would have sloshed.

Brushes, brooms and mops stand perfectly upright in amongst the wreckage of the gallery space. They appear almost as sentinels: still, silent and watchful. Some of them seem masked, their inscrutably gormless features not without a vague sense threat. Gauged. Plugged. There's a comedy about them too, something of the dimwitted evil sidekick, both accident prone and expendable. What are these characters up to? What have they been sent here to watch? There's nobody here except... ah right. I see.

Then there are the lanyards. I've always been rather troubled by lanyards. Even the word. Dumb. Ugly. (And BTW, have you ever wondered how many people have hung themselves with a lanyard? Death by lanyard? I recently tried to find out how many people die each year in Pure Gym, but they wouldn't tell me and told me to stop asking. Anyway, I've digressed again). The lime green nooses bear the words 'ROPE A DOPE' and 'NEW HEADS ON THE BLOCK' in red capitals. Both imply a direct violence to the neck, the very steeple unto which they were designed to hang. They're inspirational. (*Totally mental guys!!!*) In place of where I may seek the comfort of a confirmation of identification, once more I am stonewalled with blank synthetic absence. Instead of sporting the happy face of a co-worker, the lanyards present some familiar Beagles & Ramsay motifs of violence and emptiness, delivered here in thin primary coloured plastics. The unblinking indifference of their emoji like (and slightly modified) YouTube Error Message face (yellow). A miniature chopping board (red). A cartoon like dog bone (lime green). I wonder which team I'd be on? I wonder which is the most 'me'?

As I move between the room dividers, I find myself starting to feel a bit better about the world. I think I'm starting to get a handle on things. Maybe everything is going to be okay. I peer down into an empty drawer. Except it's not empty. There's a scattering of human teeth in it. I am aware of Beagles & Ramsay's use of the tooth as a reoccurring motif, but their appearance here feels less fantastical and more like a very real reminder of intense human suffering. Torture. Trophies of war. Pulling. Mutilated corpses. Extractions. Charms of the dead. Bleeding. Something to identify a body by. Everything in the room has just shifted. For all its deft comic turns, there's now a real severity lurking near this exhibition. I'm going to need to be more careful. We all are.

The scale and nature of the smaller objects serves to sharpen the haunting sense of human absence that was set in motion the very moment I entered the space. But it's worse than this. Of course, there's the invitation to consider where all the office grunts have gone (fire drill, training day, Kool-Aid tasting?). But more than this, there's the sense of a cover up. The manicured construction of this scripted chaos makes the whole thing feel like something of a trap. And where there's a trap, there's a victim (just ask George Foreman).² I must be brave. I must go on.

"Socks before or after trousers, but never socks before pants. That's the rule. It makes a man look scary, like a chicken"

Immanuel Kant

There are videos. But the TVs aren't on the walls. They're leaning against things, or hidden in or behind things. The first screen I pass shows one of the masked mops under a powerful spotlight, as if being interrogated. It's been rendered in a computer-generated (CGI) animated style, similar to that of corporate training video or 1990s video game. The mop seems to be repeatedly falling. But not in the Buddhist sense, rather more like one of those bullshit team-building exercises we've all had to do. But there's nobody there to catch it. Instead I watch in delight as it slams face first into the floor over and over again. Boing! Slap! Boing! Slap!

² George Foreman is probably the most infamous victim of the Rope-a-Dope boxing tactic. During his 1974 Rumble in the Jungle fight against Mohammed Ali, Foreman was goaded into exhausting himself by Ali, who pretended to be trapped against the ropes. Once Foreman's energy reserves were suitably depleted, Ali went on to easily win the fight.

On another screen there is a CGI forest. A digital moon/spotlight cuts through the snow-clad trees, exposing a clearing befitting of Little Red Riding Hood herself. A gaggle of empty office chairs wheel and spin aimlessly, as if plagued by a sentience they should have never had, consigned to a freedom they didn't choose. Allusions to the literary and filmic are as explicit as they are abundant. Kubrick. Tolkein. Edgar Allan Poe. Tarkovsky. Brothers Grimm. It's a deliberate overload. I find its Angela Carter that creeps into shot however. It's something with the post-apocalyptic feel everything seems to have. Heroes and Villains. Desolation of civilisation. Vigilante justice. Donnelly. Teeth filed too sharpened points. Shudder. Push. Push on.

A nearby screen looks up at me from inside the bottom drawer of an office cabinet. If the forest made allusions to a particular literary trope, then this video – rendered in exactly the same CGI style – makes explicit reference to a specific writer and work, namely Samuel Beckett's *Quad I & II* (1963). Four of the semi-sentient brushes patrol the perimeter of a bright yellow square. I watch on as these empty creatures follow the same set of painfully scripted routes over and over. They mimic (our) reality through distillation; a process of extreme abstraction. A choreography of the void. Meaning through elimination. Of humanity and language. Silently screaming through their vowel shaped orifices.

"...[T]he mechanical nature of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime make silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him but you can see his incomprehensible dumb-show: you wonder why he is alive."

Albert Camus

Quad I & II are often considered to be something of an answer to Albert Camus' (1955) meditations on suicide, namely, if this is all there is, should one go on living? He remarks that when it comes to life, we are in the habit of working before thinking; that we busy ourselves with repetitive and ultimately futile projects exactly to distract ourselves from the emptiness that we all know to be there. The busier we are with these projects, the more we can silence the truth. Consider Samsa, the hero of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915). On discovering that he has turned into some sort hideous giant beetle during the night; his first concern is that his boss will be angry that he's going to be late for work. Which reminds me, I should be wrapping this up. Bikram yoga at six. Inhale the future. Exhale the past. And repeat.

So, as I drag myself near to the end of my time in this exhibition, I'm left with a feeling of ominous containment, like the glass ceiling has been moving slowly down towards me my whole life. This sense of comedic dread is not an unfamiliar sensation when encountering Beagles & Ramsay's work, the existential oppression being implied through the show's militaristic title: *Circular Holding Pattern*. However, the distinct quality of (human) absence that this installation provides seems to sharpen my disquiet. Nowhere is there any visible trace of a human form (quite unusual for Beagles & Ramsay), only repeated allusions to departure, death, suffering, execution or sickness. The result is that I have been left completely alone in their world. Alone to fend for myself against any number of looming (and no doubt ridiculous) forces. Pure nausea. Pure freedom. But it is exactly these oscillations between the natural and the extraordinary, the individual and the universal, the tragic and the comedic, the violent and the beautiful, that give this exhibition a true paradoxical absurdity; an absurdity that breaks me from keeping busy with my projects.

It feels like with *Circular Holding Pattern* Beagles & Ramsay have extracted a new route to market, perhaps an even more lean and severe approach to negotiating their time on this drizzled earth. When I said earlier that I smelt a trap, my fear was that it was being laid for me. But I see now. I'm already trapped. I always have been. This exhibition is simply showing me what I have always known, but never wanted to admit. So, it is time. Time to face the hilarious emptiness of tomorrow. And who knows, perhaps in doing so I will catch a glimmer of hope. Perhaps in seeing the shit for what it is for once (a shit), I will at least know how shit it is. But hope is hope, no matter how shitty. And there's hope here, in art, if nothing else. What was it that Sarah Kane said, 'nobody survives life'? Yes. That's about right isn't it, depending on how you take it. So, we must therefore now be brave. All of us. We must go on, no matter how sick it makes us feel.

"In this life, long and hard though it may seem, live it as you'd live a dream"

M People

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