

Alys Owen: All of You

New Glasgow Society, November 2021

Distraction and Guilt

Chocolate or crisps? Hmmm. Let's go chocolate. It's been a long morning. I deserve it. Anyway, what was I doing? Oh yeah. Distraction and guilt. That was it. In his excellent 2018 book 'The Playstation Dreamworld' Alfie Bown uses mobile phone games to examine the impact of what Walter Benjamin had predicted to be a 'culture of distraction'. Giving examples such as *Candy Crush* and *Cookie Clicker*, Bown points out how these apparently frivolous distractions from the grind of the working day which seem completely devoid of meaning are anything but. On the contrary, games that fragment the concentration of the worker can profoundly increase productivity. Through bringing about a state of guilt, the player feels that they must 'pay back' for their moment of *Candy Crush* indulgence. In short, we input data a hell of a lot quicker after a quick game of *Smashy Road*.¹ Anyway, that's enough of that for now, there's some chocolate to scoff and an exhibition to chat about.

Emptiness

The first thing that I notice when approaching New Glasgow Society's (East) gallery, is that I can't see any artwork. It's only when I'm well through the door and faffing about with my rain sodden coat that I notice a few small white rocky lumps poking out of the gallery's (white) walls.

Coat removed and the next task is of course to find the gallery notes - that little bit of (almost always) badly written art waffle that points out all the clever things that I probably wouldn't have understood without it. There isn't, however, any to be seen. Nor is there any wall text or floor plan. (But how I am expected to know what it all means?) It's like that then is it? Ok, well, fingers crossed.²

The rocky lump closest to the entrance seems to be some kind of body part made of white stone, protruding out from the gallery wall at about face height. At least I think it's a body part. It looks a bit like an apple that's so appalled by its own bitterness it's attempted to eat itself; like a pair of lips (facial or otherwise) pursed to the point of vanishing from sight altogether. It feels representational, but I don't know of what. The implied weight of the stone is completely offset by how it appears to be floating toward me in a faintly threatening manner. In scale and poise it reminds me of the alien that

¹ Bown (2018) goes on to discuss the specifics of how these games are designed to provide just the right level of distraction, and at just the right time of day.

² I concur with Robins (2013) that exhibitions choosing to provide no accompanying information are increasingly rare and almost always divisive. On the one hand, gallery visitors can feel alienated by a perceived lack of generosity on the part of the artist and/or institution. On the other hand, if it's good art, then shouldn't it be able to speak for itself? Bottom line, whether it's the right decision or not depends on the artwork. (And in my experience, it's almost always the wrong decision).

bursts out of Sigourney Weaver's stomach - primed for mischief and concealing its real strength. As I back away, I find myself smiling (back) at it.³

On the adjacent side of the room there's three little stone mouths dotted along the wall. They're the same height and material as the imploding apple, but appear in quite a different stylistic language. Amorphous biological ambiguity has given way to downright cartoon slapstick. Each of mouths is about toddler sized and defiantly bares its teeth.⁴ They appear like fragments of gargoyles or grotesques.⁵ I find myself reading them as objects that have been cast from things in the real world. Toys perhaps? Definitely something cheap. Something quick. They lead me to think that the first object I encountered was indeed some kind of biological orifice, and had also been cast from something (rather than just sculpted from nothing). They're (again) slightly aggressive. Slightly confrontational. Blank. Cold. Grinning. I back away smiling (back) at them.

Stone

Stone is slow.

Stone is quiet.

Stone offers a permanence, a weight, an authority.

Things made out of stone are often very big.

Stone is the material of tombstones, monuments and statues.

Stone is cold.

Stone is the material of death.

Back to the show (part 1)

Next I'm met by two big dumb eyes. Once more, they're rendered in white stone; two aviator shaped lenses each about the size of a human belly. Wait, they ARE human bellies. That's not a pupil, it's a cast navel! I take this as my confirmation: everything I've been looking at until this point has been a cast of something from the real world. This is also the first clearly identifiable object. This is a part of a human form. Two stomachs. The starting point of life and home to the umbilicus (navel) - our final connection to our mothers. Unlike what's come before, everything's nice and explicit here. There's

³ Sometime after my visit I discovered that this item was in fact something called a chayote. Google image search it if you don't believe me. They're the most amusing of fruits.

⁴ There are objects in the mouths, most notably a (real) red rose. It appears as bloody flash of red in an otherwise (thus far) monochrome experience. It adds a moment of gothic comedy to proceedings; a moment of slapstick romance. Sharp, beautiful and knowingly ridiculous.

⁵ As Raguenet (2010) notes, in architectural terms, the meaning and use of the term 'grotesque' is increasingly being employed to describe a search for the abnormal or the representation of caricature, rather than to simply refer to forms sculpted in an attempt to convey the need for the Church's protection against the fearsome beasts of the bible.

also a pun at work, so heavy handed it's as if it's been laid on to make us wince. Omphaloskepsis! A dangerous preponderance of emotional self-awareness. Oh goodness. Where are we heading next?

Casting

I don't know anything about casting, but it seems to me to be an exercise in capture. She's stopping these things. Freezing them. Extracting them. Replicating them perfectly. And look at them now, all naked and ridiculous.

Back to the show (part 2)

There's some Monster Munch falling out of their packet onto a low level plinth. Like everything else, they've been rendered at a 1x1 scale.⁶ They're not made of stone. They're bronze. Perhaps more resonant than any description and analysis I can provide of this absurd and beguiling work is something I witness whilst looking at it. A toddler hurtles towards the work with her arms outstretched like an expectant zombie. Only at the last possible moment is she scooped off the plinth by her father, her straining fingers narrowly missing the prize, which will now remain forever just out of reach. I know how she feels.

Moving round the corner I reach the back gallery. There's a tiny dot on the wall. It looks like a little golden button. A full stop to the exhibition. With my mind full of bellies and lips, I find myself wondering which part of the human anatomy I'm looking at this time. I sort of recognise it but I can't quite be sure, especially because it's made/coated in gold. I'm almost a bit nervous to get too close, in case it's a body part that one wouldn't want to get too close to. Then it dawns on me. It's piece of god damn processed pasta. A bloody Tesco Tortellini or something. Do they really look like that? God they're weird; almost like little alien space ships.

As I approach the end of my visit, I make my way back through the gallery space towards the door, glancing with moderate trepidation at the works that I've passed, slightly anxious that there's another surprise lurking, or some other element to them I've missed and they're only now going to spring on me once I'm retreating.⁷

I pop into the side gallery next to the exit. It will be my final stop. It contains a sink (one of the old fancy ones, the kind that I imagine Kirsty Allsop would approve of. What are they called? Belfast

⁶ A gesture that Owen also employs in her two-dimensional works.

⁷ Whilst not a central thematic aspect of the exhibition, there is a science fiction quality to many of the works. For example, when walking through the space, there's almost the feeling of not wanting to look away for fear of them somehow moving, as one would not want to look away from a Weeping Angel in Doctor Who (the Weeping Angels of course being the notoriously powerful species of quantum-locked humanoids who take the form of stone statues).

sinks? I can't recall?) It's standing on a metal frame, just the right height for a toddler to peek over into. I can hear water. Sure enough, contained within there's two stone fish on top of each other, the higher of which is spurting a fountain of water out of its mouth. Once again, I suspect them to be casts of something, but of what, again I just can't tell. They vaguely grotesque and slightly toyish. But they're somehow not as slapstick as the things that have come before. In fact, I find them faintly disgusting (and not just because they've made me think of Kirsty Allsop). Two writhing ghost fish in a Victorian sink. There's a darkness to this concluding work, or at least, perhaps, a more pointed reminder about survival.⁸

It's about time

This exhibition leaves me a bit bloody melancholic and wistful. I can't help thinking about death, or perhaps to be more specific, the temporality of life. The flickering romance of it all. And then, like all moments, it's gone. The arbitrary, absurd, coincidental, hideous beauty of a life lived, a love lost and a death awaiting. It's all getting a bit Elton John isn't it?⁹

Perhaps it's funny that we tend to think and talk about sculpture in almost exclusively spatial terms, like the dimensional manifold is separable in this way. This exhibition speaks to the excruciating vastness of both space and time, and the momentary blip that an individual life can be seen to occupy within this.¹⁰ It can make one feel a little bit small, insignificant even. But being small and being insignificant are two very different things.

Through slowing down objects that are (even to us) small and fleeting in size and temporal scale, Owen manages to expose an almost overwhelming beauty and white hot wonder in experiencing the small joys of being here now. Sure, 107,000,000,000 people have died on this planet in the last 6,000,000 years. Why not, then, savour that flavour drenched crisp at the bottom of the packet that makes your entire face shrivel up in vinegary joy?

Well, because it's not that simple. This isn't a fucking Coldplay song and it's not all fucking yellow. She's not going to let us get away with such a poetic and convenient construal of (our) reality. Through freezing these objects in space and time, Owen is also making us look at them for longer than they seem to want to be looked at.¹¹ And the longer you look, the less comfortable they seem to

⁸ I did overhear a couple of visitors discussing the two fish in terms of the implied relationship to Pisces. Whilst this may be a potential interpretive lens to view the work through, I would take it to be a red herring (yes, I went there). Truth be told, I don't care about astrology and it's my text so I'll write about what I want. If you want to talk about this work in astrological terms, write your own space fish text.

⁹ This is a candle in the wind joke. Get it?

¹⁰ This is perhaps when we switch which type of measuring stick we're using, moving from human time to cosmological time as our gauge of assessment.

¹¹ It's interesting that Owen's strategy of capturing an object in a white void two-dimensionally is in effect being applied here in the third dimension, the large sections of empty white walls serving as the equivalent the white of her gesso boards.

become. Sweeties. Snacks. Cheap Plastic Toys. Peperamis. Scratchcards. Babybels. Monster Munch. They're so jolly and colourful, so delicious and so naughty.

Her selection and isolation of such subjects captures something of what Bown (2018) was exposing about mobile phone games: how a little indulgent moment here or there may not only serve to consolidate our impression that capitalism is a useful and positive force, but also how a quick act of licensed transgression may actually reinforce our desire to 'pay back' what we owe for our little act of perceived nonconformism. Bown (2018) stresses that the more these games feel like completely innocuous distractions, the more coercive they are. I would, again, suggest a similarity in Owen's selection of everyday marginalia is present: it's exactly because we might normally dismiss the objects she presents us with as being completely insignificant, they work so well upon us.¹²

In other words, is that Space Raider really just an innocent taste sensation, or is it also a (very small yet active) distraction - a grinning trinket of Western Capitalism's insidious campaign to shape our tastes, behaviours and beliefs? How should this be reconciled against the undeniable moment of pleasure it's just given me? Was that even pleasure I just felt? What else in the world is like this? How am I going to get through the day if I start to think like this? The short and perhaps unsatisfactory truth is that this shit is as ugly as it is complicated, and we're neck deep in it (Owen included).

This exhibition, however, takes an arguably brave stance in offering no resolved political leaning on these complex questions; nor does it offer any convenient or familiar anti-capitalist 'answers'. I find this silence both difficult and refreshing. There's a humanity to the honesty, and a confidence in refraining from taking any easy pot-shots at a global system that (a) it is itself a part of, and (b) we all know is a big fucked up pile of shit anyway. Instead, Owen seems to orientate us towards the realm of metaethics, a quieter space where we can (again) slow down and reflect upon why the questions of human posterity, wealth, suffering, productivity and even survival seem so important to us. Is death always a bad thing? How hungry is too hungry? Is suffering acceptable?¹³ If so, how much, and does it make a difference who's going hungry and dying? Whilst it might feel easy to dismiss such questions as having self-evident or 'obvious' answers (of course suffering is bad etc.), it is exactly these kinds of question that the ethical review boards over at Nike, Microsoft and Amazon don't consider to have such obvious answers.¹⁴

¹² What I mean here is that if you were buying a Range Rover or a sweet ass pair of Air Jordans, due to the scale and size of the expense, you might be more conscious (at whatever level) of the purchase as being complicit within the macroeconomic market system.

¹³ I use the term 'metaethics' in the most general of senses to denote a region of enquiry separate from normative ethical enquiry. For example, if an ethical question might be 'should I give to charity?', a metaethical question would be 'why do we consider giving to charity a worthy act?', or in the case of campaigns like Soccer Aid 'who the fuck does Robbie Williams think he is when asking me to give to charity to watch him kick a ball around with his celebrity mates, and what the fuck has this got to do with Water Aid?'. For further information, see Miller (2010).

¹⁴ Monteux & Monteux (2020, Pg. 19) state: 'care is based on an image of the human being as a complex and dynamic system of physical, mental, emotional, moral, social and spiritual elements that need to be in harmonious balance'. The designers of *Candy Crush* know this too.

Maybe I should have gone with Crisps

From a gallery space that initially looked to be devoid of any artwork, *All of You* has offered a rich, seductive and deeply troubling relief upon the shape of humanity.¹⁵ It's a bit of a quieter outing than I've seen from Owen before. A bit of a leaner and more severe approach to exhibition making and storytelling. This is reflected in her uncompromising decision not to allow the visitor any gallery notes or a floor plan. In their absence, it is the works that have done all the talking, and they have done it with an almost terrifying thin-lipped assurance.¹⁶ The slalom layout of the installation seemed to oscillate between obscured naturalistic representationalism (the chayote, the bellies) and human representations of naturalistic forms (the mouths, the fish, the Monster Munch feet). The result was a productively unstable narrative arc, each aspect confounding and informing the material and conceptual interplay running between the installation's expansive nodal interface.

Put simply, it's a testament to Owen's work that such apparently simple, sparse and unassuming artistic gestures can manifest such contradictory and complex sets of ideas. Furthermore, it's refreshing to encounter an exhibition that isn't trying to change my view of the world by smashing me round the head with all sorts of big and clever ideas. Rather, this exhibition has instead punctured my reality with a series of insidious pin pricks, blows I didn't even feel until it was too late. Sneaky, brilliant and quietly shocking.

J. Witters 2021

It's just they're less interested in bringing about healthy mental states and more interested in scrambling your precious little brain box into malnourished capitalist slot machine.

¹⁵ The title of show perhaps reminding the gallery visitor of their active role within the landscape of the exhibition's theoretical address.

¹⁶ Perhaps now, in this final concluding paragraph, I can start referring to the exhibition and works as an installation, as that, in effect, is what it was.

References

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