

To the Power of Twelve

Christine Borland

Singing dichotomies

“the archive... is not a quiet retreat for professionals and scholars and craftspersons. It is a crucible of human experience. A battleground for meaning and significance. A babel of stories.”¹

Over the past twelve months Christine Borland has re-submerged into this ‘babel of stories’ at Mount Stuart. Her first foray in 2003 saw her invoking the impulse to collect and classify, responding to the House’s narratives of cultural repository and naval infirmary. Borland’s most recent engagement has defied the traditional notion of the archive as ‘invisible’ - “an unquestioned and transparent conduit”² - and amplifies Mount Stuart’s whispers into a harmonious superposition of sounds.

The sound that first reaches our ears is the ghostly hush of a once-crammed hospital ward. During the First World War the Marble Hall (or the ‘Middle Ward’) would have rung with the competing strains of fellowship and retreat, amusement and pain. The theme of dichotomies runs throughout.

Moss Pillow suggests comfort, rest, care: the antiseptic and absorbent properties of the sphagnum moss fulfilling medicinal as well as cushioning purposes. This buffering extends to the ‘pool’ of 444 hand-blown clear glass spheres enclosed. Their perfectly pure surfaces reflect in equal measure the astronomical map and the astrological stained glass above, echoing the Third Marquis’s overlapping interest in both. The scientific and the spiritual are contented companions. Yet the glass balls are produced to medical standards, transcending the material impurities of the fishing floats (their inspiration source). Has this purification also refined their superstitious powers of protection, the material for the immaterial? The ‘peace pool’ is gathered together within the pink pillow, the hem of a parachute. There is something pertinent about the hem of the first Levitical priestly robes being purple and scarlet: these glass signifiers of faith are sheltered within the edgings of sacrificial responsibility; conjuring a picture of a small child seeking refuge within the folds of her mother’s skirt. Fear and intimacy, vulnerability and protection sit hand-in-hand.

The dichotomies continue upstairs in the Conservatory. We are drawn through the Horoscope Bedroom’s neo-gothic pillars to be greeted by a bulbous organic form suspended from the conservatory’s metal frame. Its familiar pink hue – the silk parachute released from its hem downstairs – echoes that of a moss fruiting body seen in an illustration from the Third Earl of Bute’s own Botanical Tables. Borland has been captivated by botanical collections before, not least during her research at Glasgow University’s Special Collections to commemorate the 550th anniversary of the University’s founding. There she was introduced to perhaps the earliest scientific botanical account (1542), which included a list of plants thought to have been used in pregnancy and

¹ Verne Harris in T. Cook and J.M. Schwartz, ‘Archives, Records and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance’, *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 171-185: 183.

² Cook and Schwartz (2002), 174.

childbirth. In the Conservatory, botany was not used to facilitate the start of life but in order to preserve it. Yet those 'rebirths' performed in that war-time operating room were still facilitated by women: initiators, coordinators, healers, labourers, that enabled the Home Front to function, even flourish. The striated pink tear-drop seems to give a material nod to the feminist prowess of Louise Bourgeois (a child in France during the First World War). Along a similar vein to Bourgeois's dark themes, the nurturing use of the moss deposited within highlights the cruel irony that parachutes were refused to British airmen in WWI, invoking harrowing dichotomies of endangerment and safety, impairment and repair.

These themes bring to mind the legendary story of Joseph Beuys's WWII rescue from an airplane wreckage by nomadic Tartars who wrapped him in fat and felt to keep him warm. The irony of having received care from the 'other' spurred Beuys towards a life-long challenge of assumptions. Setting aside the contested validity of this tale, it certainly defined the use and significance of such organic materials in his work, and even took him to the moss-drenched wilderness of Rannoch Moor twice in 1970 in preparation for his inaugural exhibition at the Edinburgh Festival.

This close relationship between preservation and destruction continues downstairs in the Armoury. Large acrylic boards display an ordered collection of individual photographs of 144 feeder cups. Having found three in the Mount Stuart collection, Borland amassed her own collection from eBay, the objects having been rendered worthless by their mass-production. They are symbols of nurture, sustenance and restoration. They also cast a dark shadow. For some they were cyphers of control: feeder cups were used to force-feed prisoners, notably the Suffragettes. These women's final bastion of control was their bodies, but even the choice to nourish or deny was taken from them.

Interestingly Beuys once went on hunger strike as an act of solidarity with fellow artist Jimmy Boyle. The two were introduced by Richard Demarco when Boyle was on day release from the Special Unit of Barlinnie Prison in 1980. It was while serving life that Boyle was introduced to art and literature and became a respected sculptor and writer. Having been engaged in correspondence with Boyle since the early 1970s, Beuys was taken by the forward-thinking approach of the special prison unit and when Boyle was relocated to a more traditional prison where he was not allowed to make art, Beuys went on hunger strike for a month – the traditional form of prison protest. Unlike those before him who protested from within, Beuys did not face the foreboding presence of the feeder cup. For the Suffragettes protest was met with oppression, resistance overcome by force. Still their rallying cries could not be silenced and the debris from their impact spread new life. The photographs on display in the Armoury bear witness to this trace. Each cup was destroyed in a booth with its portrait, the explosive spray signing its mark. The resultant pattern alludes to the strength of each explosion. Borland plays with the aesthetic results of these three different levels of explosive control, both here and on the table in the Dining Room upstairs. There, the shards are displayed in three rippling waves of destruction. To explode in a controlled manner seems a misnomer, a contradiction of terms.

Further paradoxes are explored in the Swimming Pool. The assumptions of technical advancement during times of war are challenged by the reality that in such extremes we are often led to resort to age-old materials and methods. Borland's floating 'groin' sculptures are a marriage of old and new with *brassFill* (new 3D printing technology) and nettle thread. Medicine's patriarch, Hippocrates, is

said to have had around 61 different nettle preparations. Borland has drawn on Hippocrates's methods before in works such as *Spirit Collection: Hippocrates* (1999). But the healing and protective properties of nettles has other roots. In Norse legend it was said that if you burned nettles during a thunder storm you would be protected from lightning; Thor, the god of thunder, being represented by nettles. Again, science and superstition exchange glances, with the serendipitous rumble of the pool's filter providing an ominous soundtrack. Perhaps the most pertinent use of nettles is that they were later mixed with hemp for relief from shock. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) even now is an under-researched condition, but during and after the World Wars it was widespread and devastating, yet shockingly dismissed. Duty and fallibility, strength and vulnerability, aren't allowed to cohabit. Reality, however, is more complex and multi-coloured.

Borland beautifully sets free those different strands of light. Her interest in the archive and monument of Mount Stuart allows her to make connections and reveal conversations that are not readily audible. As Derrida observed about Freud's fascination with archaeological digs in *Archive Fever*, he wishes "to let the stones talk". Borland more than allows Mount Stuart's stones to talk, they sing: laments, arias, war songs intermingle in probing melodies and cadences. Unlike Freud's attempt to deny the mediatory role of the archivist, Borland's role falls more in line with that described by Mark Wigley (Professor and Dean Emeritus at Columbia University): "the archive emerges through the voice of a particular individual or character... the archiving gesture protects documents by projecting them rather than concealing them".³ Borland releases these conversations and gives them air to breath, inviting new audiences to engage with the stories of the House, which "awaits new eyes, demands new eyes".⁴ As is noted on the façade of Palais de Chaillot for those who pass through its doors, the French poet Paul Valéry's words set out our task:

*It depends on those who pass
Whether I am a tomb or treasure
Whether I speak or am silent
The choice is yours alone.
Friend, do not enter without desire.*

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³ M. Wigley, 'Unleashing the Archive', *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory and Criticism*, 2: 2 (Winter 2005), 10-15: 13.

⁴ Wigley (2005), 11.