

## ***Jennifer Higgin-The Past Sure is Tense* (Ricky Swallow-This Time Another Year, June 2005)**

### **'The past sure is tense. The past sure is now.'**

Captain Beefheart<sup>1</sup>

'There was a fox stuck in the roots of a Cyprus tree; we made a fire. We had slug guns in the house and took shots at the magpies; a bird nested in the roller doors of the garage and we found a blue tongue lizard dead in the sand dunes; the skink was the failed pet that always dies. There are photos of my brother and father preparing to go duck hunting but I don't remember them bringing anything home.' <sup>2</sup>

A study in counterpoint: land and air. Animals and birds snap frozen in wood, their fidelity to appearance their most unreal aspect. Guilt mingles with recall as it wanders through the corridors of old museums and teenage bedrooms. It doesn't matter how old an object is, or how long ago you did that thing you wish you hadn't: every time you look at it or think about it it's resurrected. Images can function like an inventory or the settling of debt; a scrutiny of the past the artist experiences in the present in order to fully understand it.

Like a group of dead orphans these animals and birds are not aware of the circumstances of their demise; they seem less lifeless than sleepy. Two lizards, two rats, a duck, some mice; a magpie like an Antipodean pheasant with a humble sparrow nestled in its chest; the tough clean lines of a fox skull; an isolated swallow (the name-sake).

The *Losing End* (2005) is a wooden relief; a tondo time capsule of vivid neglect comprising dead birds and animals. Death does not always mean disappearance; here, despite the elegiac atmosphere, there is a faint hum of something urgent and alive (the dance of death). Objects carved with care make you look slow down and look hard. Such precision creates a clarity seemingly unobstructed by gesture or effort; but explanation is another matter. The most familiar things can be unfathomable.

Swallow makes sculptures that replicate reality to an unreal degree. The personal is filtered through the formal; the imagination through precedent. A dead rabbit echoes a painting by Jan Fyt or Jan Baptist Weenix; a duck tumbles like a detail from a carving by Grindling Gibbons. Every surface bears the imprint of experience both touched and imagined (a sculpture is one kind of energy stopped in its tracks to create another – in this case, a transformed tree). Sometimes the act of revelation can be almost supernatural (it is all this, and more). It can be useful to resurrect ghosts to help you navigate the past, but it's important to remember that some are younger than others (skulls are as familiar to skateboards as they are to 17th century painting and carving. Swallow says the skulls on the Powell Peralta skateboard decks are 'among the most stubborn images in my subliminal source book'<sup>3</sup>.) Sometimes an image grows from stories so quiet or distant they're hard to hear (what happened when you were young); sometimes from a choked syllable or a sentence shouted into distortion (you're getting older); someone humming or struggling to remember something that plagues them; perhaps something or someone they miss. A line from a song you can't get out of your head.

*Killing Time* (2003): a life-size wooden sculpture of the fish and crustaceans Swallow remembers his family catching when he was a child, arranged across the kitchen table from his childhood. Lemon peel, a knife and a lone fish teeter precariously and permanently on the edge. What took hours to hunt and years to remember took months to carve. Each memory has been scrutinized and replicated; a debt paid in time. It's a sculpture evolved from worn-out spaces (both the ones you touch and the ones worn thin with recollection); one that engages with a history seen only in images made by other artists (Dutch 17th and early Australian marine painting and carving); and one Swallow was an eyewitness to – his own history, growing up by the sea.

A still life is always more than the sum of its parts (its past?); a reiteration that someone who was here once has gone away and that big histories intertwine with the ones only you know about. The dead and inanimate are dependent on the living to animate them. (In Rome, the catacombs of the Capucine cemetery are decorated with delicate arrangements of bones. Signs on the walls declare 'What you are we were. What we are you will be'.) Objects and skin fuel memories; what is left when someone goes? What do they leave behind? *Come Together* (2002) is a wooden skull buried in the folds of a wooden beanbag that looks soft enough to collapse in. It's strange and sad and ordinary (everybody has a skull yet they can be the stuff of nightmares) – the domestic married to the eternal; household failure and small deaths (love leaves); the ballad of a rented home; an offering up, the end of a relationship, the road, a life.

Everyone dies; but before that happens they need somewhere to rest.

Dust settles; people disappear but leave pieces of themselves; you find it hard to touch what they have touched. Isolation is familiar to a still life: a slice of bread slips to the side; a knife hovers at the edge of the picture plane; an empty cup, an abandoned meal, a slumped hare; someone has always just left the room. But often it's an isolation which seems more peaceful than an exile should be; as if solitude might have something to recommend it.

In *The Arrangement* (2005) two snakes support a bicycle helmet modelled on one that Swallow wore when he first moved to London. (Structures for heads recur again and again: hoods, hats, skulls.) The carving of the pale, soft wood is exquisitely hypersensitive to differences in texture: the tiny wrinkle on a snake's mouth and the dull sheen of a reptilian scale; a miniscule dint in a battered helmet. It's absurdly life-like, as ghostly as an accurate hallucination. Recollection and invention intermingle, slowly carved in an attempt to retrieve or replicate, to mourn or to fling into the future what has been lost and what might yet be discovered through the simple expedient of observation.

There is a clear implication here: heads (the imagination, the mind) are fragile and life often tenuous (cycling in a big city is like navigating a dangerous digestive system). The everyday is wrapped in the symbolic: danger and protection become interchangeable. The indifferent snakes do not recognise borders; they inhabit their space with the delicate sinew of Baroque ribbons, animated at the promise of something we have no access to. The sculpture alludes to more than its materials; it resonates with holes, temptation, poison; it's a cock sculpture, a Joni Mitchell song, the eels in a horse's skull in the *Tin Drum* that prefigure a descent into madness; an urban fall from grace. It makes clear that objects and animals are rarely one thing: our imagination spins them into many meanings, and weaves what we need from them. *The Arrangement* appears to be moving, as though replete with a life in the process of transformation; the eyes of the snake dart about: vision itself is an anxious object. It makes clear that the skull is something that needs careful tending: it can be worn down or broken; it's pitted against time.

The shape and size of some ideas can be felt more acutely than measured; sometimes, however, a feeling can be so acute it's almost tangible. *The Exact Dimensions of Staying Behind* (2005): a life-size vanitas, a seated skeleton, its skull uplifted like a death's head in the sun; immobile ecstasy, a hooded top that cushions a fragile shoulder. The bones of a hand clutch a staff like a microphone, the elongated bow of an instrument, a cross (objects of solace and expression). Each element is inseparable: drapery and structure relate not only to the rungs of the chair but to the memory of other sculptures; like an old man dreaming of his earlier manifestations or struggling to remember a melody that touched him once. (Details, like memories, are fragile, even when they were laboriously hewn; everything reminds everyone of bodies; once released does the singer's voice remain part of the body in air?). The body, like the still-life, is reduced to its constituent parts; the bones of experience, waiting for the flesh of the imagination to finish it. The vanitas declares nothing is permanent – except for this image of impermanence; something static that alludes to the passage of time; an image of death that prompts a re-examining of life; ordinary objects and scenes that make us look at the overlooked.

What happens then is anyone's guess. Time is all.

1. Ricky Swallow mentioned to me that 'The Past Sure is Tense' by Captain Beefheart is the best song title ever.
2. Author in conversation with Ricky Swallow, London, January 2005
3. Ricky Swallow: Field Recordings, Justin Paton, Craftsman House, Thames and Hudson (Australia) Fishermens Bend, p. 68.
4. Ibid. p. 50