

Long Time Dead – Debra Swann

Debra Swann has form when it comes to acting out; in previous works she has taken on a host of roles, performing variously as scientist, explorer, or philanthropist in order to scrutinize the making of myth and history. In *Long Time Dead* she is simultaneously collector, archaeologist, anthropologist and psychoanalyst, turning her fascinated but critical gaze upon the objects, tasks, desires and emotions that make up domestic life. It's easy to find curious the products and rituals of another culture or civilization, but Swann's investigation – during which she is both the subject and interrogator, and where she uses a repertoire of common or garden materials – makes clear the very strangeness of the now and the close at hand.

Imagine a core drilled metaphorically from the deposits of family routine; how many trips to the supermarket would there be, how many household surfaces wiped, just how many floors hoovered? With its anthropogenic strata of plastic bags, Jeye cloths and carpet, layered pink toilet paper, silver foil and printed ephemera, her work *Totem (Borehole)* surely makes manifest the daily activities grown invisible by repetition. It displays the scale of ongoing labour and marks out the slow duration of domestic time; this totem pole towers above us, operating as a triumphant recognition of all that has been done, and yet surely it also suggests that the relentless sedimentation of everyday stuff may yet squeeze the life out of us.

The show carries further testaments to the passage of time: Swann has eschewed the old symbolism of urn or obelisk and chosen to render in marble such quotidian objects as a broom, and a dustpan and brush. As ever in her practice, all is not quite as it seems; the marbling is odd, marked with reddish smudges rather like bloody fingerprints. I peer closer, wondering exactly what horror they might have been used to clear up. That violent resentments brew in domestic locations is hardly a surprise if you're familiar with TV crime drama, but looking more carefully, as any forensic investigator must, it's quickly apparent that things are not what they purport to be. These items are Fablon fabrications, merely confectioned through the application of a marbled sticky-backed plastic, whose original designers must take responsibility for that weirdly sanguineous pattern. It's no accident that Swann spotted its suggestive potential: she is always alert for what materials might mean or do.

I notice further oddness. The broom is standing up of its own volition – it isn't propped against the wall: if the music from Disney's *Fantasia* started up, no doubt it would be off and sweeping all by itself... That Swann wants us to feel the animism of ordinary objects is clearly conveyed in her sculptural transformation of the 'marble' brush's bristles into a rather undulating 'skirt'. As a result the brush looks lively and somehow I expect none of us would be too surprised if it swept up the dustpan and launched them both into a breathless tango across the gallery floor.

Swann conducts a psychic excavation of the home through a focus upon the extremes of maternal feeling. Her *Family Portrait*, rendered as a collection of shrunken heads of the sort familiar from anthropological museums, are both grotesque and comedic. Manufactured from the unlikely combination of brown paper, jute and bristle, the decapitated heads of a mother and father, a young child and the family dog, dangle like disturbing baubles from the gallery ceiling, their faces uncannily serene given the circumstance. That they have been suspended via a long cord, which finishes up wrapped tightly around a wall-mounted cleat hook, suggests domestic artifacts put to pretty horrific use. We know these heads are entirely fictional, but the surprising degree of verisimilitude achieved with their concoction of everyday materials, and the loving attention to their making – the careful alignment of eyelashes, the faint sheen to the dog's nose – means that nonetheless we are disturbed to think why someone (a mother indeed!) – might have wanted to act out such a terrible thing. These crazy fetishes speak of the effort to keep safe those one cares about, and an understanding of the maternal propensity to suffocate and control, as well as resonating with the creative tension involved in making art and making life.

It's hard to determine if the *Babies (on Sticks)* – three forms atop long broom handles whose hairy little heads protrude from too tightly-swaddled red cot blankets – are the product of murderous rage or a potent celebratory force: propped up against the wall, they seem sacrificial trophies, scalps captured perhaps from some previous warring skirmish, they demand to be taken hold of and raised up – a supernatural force to be carried into life's battles. There's something else going on too: the babies' 'heads' being in fact mere coconuts, this line up also invokes the fairground shy; our imaginative participation is surely invited, and as a result my fingers itch with the urge to lob a missile and knock their little blocks off. Swann seems to be leading us on, inviting us to suspend 'normal' behaviour awhile and to explore those fantasies we must usually endeavor to repress.

Her work frequently holds a number of ideas and sensations in tension. In *Charm*, the delicate cast of a young child's arm is rendered in foil and displayed against gorgeous blue and white china. At first it is decorative, an over-scale bibelot reminiscent of the trinkets that swing from bracelets; then it is commemorative, coming from that sentimental tradition of casting babies feet or first shoes, an artifact to be displayed perhaps in the nursery, or kept safely in a drawer amongst other items intended to preserve fleeting memories; but finally we also see it for what it is, a dismembered body part, one that is indeed seemingly oven-ready – all wrapped in tinfoil, and with a decorative plate awaiting its place on the cannibalistic dinner table... It feels complicated; I picture that familiar game when mothers pretend to gobble up their babies' deliciously plump fingers or scrumptious tummies: the children giggle delightedly, enjoying

the anticipation of such ticklish terror, and their mothers know how this enactment is simultaneously mere play and a real desire to devour.

These works frequently consider the maternal position, sometimes very physically: in *Effigy* there's a tall cardboard container, open at the top, which seems to contain the figure of a woman; her luxuriant and unruly hair spills out; it conceals her face such that it's impossible to read her emotions and I can't tell if she has been boxed in, arms pinioned by her side in what isn't far removed from a coffin, or whether she has sought this as a place to hide away, somewhere quiet to finally get a moment to herself away from the kids' incessant chatter and the need to put in yet another load of washing.

This box reminds me of those we place into storage in attics or cellars, optimistically intending that they should only be left for a short while until we get around to sorting out or finding a proper place for their contents; the reality is of course that they end up staying there, largely forgotten until building work or a house move necessitates we attend once more to their troublesome existence. By the time we get to inspect them again, moths and beetles have often chewed their way into our paperwork, whilst damp has rusted metals or blotted fabrics with blackening mould. I notice that a strange fungus has seemingly colonized this particular box; fruiting bodies have erupted into elaborate sculptural brackets, and when I look around I can see it has spawned further mushrooms on the gallery walls and beneath the shelf carrying the visitors' book.

Like those purveyors of fiction that lock the madwoman in the attic or amplify the cellar's potential for horror, Swann knows very well the strong magic inherent in the domestic, the ordinary and everyday. A portal has been opened here between the usually private familial realm and the very public space of the gallery; Swann is using it to channel powerful energies and desires, and to explore the difficult emotions we must usually seek to control or deny in daily life. It is a dangerous but vital examination: take care as you enter her world.

Joanne Lee