AKARA ART

'OBJECTS IN TRANSITION'

Elizabeth Drury

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First, Elizabeth Drury must set the scene. She starts by gathering the objects she has collected in her studio: bricks, tiles, bottles, tablecloths, clear plastic pieces, and carefully arranges a tableau. She uses mirrors and lamplight to scatter and fragment the objects, fading some from view, exaggerating others. She then translates the scene in front of her onto paper with a drawing process that is almost automatic, and perfectly surreal. We may call this a still life, but it is anything but *still* – there is movement, and there are characters coming to life.

In *Uncertain Mass*, a winged creature sits atop a scaly, uncertain structure, showering its feathers over the scene. On a second look it is a creature about to take flight; on a third look, it is no longer a creature, but the topmost burst of a volcano, erupting into a darkly lit plume. Curving, almost modernist, structures sit at its base, tied to the ground by very thin strings; they must be so light, we think, so ghost-like and frail. Only seconds from floating away. In *Mirage*, wave-like undulations cut into the set, and thick shards of light tear our focus. The scene is composed of several such ripples, and twirling long tendrils – almost as though only one half has been plunged into water, leaving the other completely dry. But there are no right answers, and each viewing of Drury's work is able to summon a new reading.

Drury's work is able to both unsettle and engage its viewer at first sight, a quality that she intuitively administers into her frame. Think of a child's first object, she says, and how it helps the child find independence; how there is learning enabled by the child's interaction with the object. The object may even gain a character, may even be personified, and carry an entire personality. What might first appear as quite simple – a building block, for instance – is transformed into something totally magical, and serene. "I was thinking of how I could drag repetitive, mundane, objects through a similar process," says Drury. An indeed, she does. She is able to charm the objects into movement through her retelling of the scene. She thus names the objects she uses as transitional, seeing them as points of mediation between the reality of her studio and the filters of her imagination – between this world and another. The work is familiar, but also completely unrecognisable.

There is a certain fastidiousness by which Drury operates, maintaining a precise control over every element that she lets into her frame. When casting light upon her chosen objects, she will look for a particular texture or shadow, working to accentuate it. Rather like a painter, the possibility for illusion is Drury's palette, and the work is entirely set in potentials. Although maintaining a high level of control, Drury ultimately allows for the object to

produce itself at the time of drawing. It is only at this time that the serendipitous may occur – that a sudden change in light may shift her focus, or draw out a new, unnoticed texture or surface. Each object, true to its transitional status, thus becomes entirely performative: moving with and to the request of the precise moment at which Drury captures it.

Drury's interest in engaging with mundane objects is perhaps symptomatic of the current historical moment, at a time where everything is determined by excess, or a state of emergency, a return to the mundane is almost like a return to the pastoral – to what is at once familiar as it is uncanny. Drury handles this with caution, and also with wit. There is something energetic to her work, but also something that lingers, that is old; that emerges as though from a deep well of time. The work is not always darkly intense, as often Drury introduces elements of whimsy – for instance, a pair of shining, twisted spheres in *Crossover* are as though moving along neatly paved paths in an impossible maze. The scene is overlaid with soft, falling leaves, and there is a sense that everything is constantly shifting here, and that there is room for humor. The work is inherently filmic, and prone to illusions we are accustomed to with film. A sudden animation of an object, or a liquid movement of light, characterize this most succinctly. *Lamps and Mirrors* is perhaps most reminiscent of the Surrealist experiments with photography from the 1920s. We see only soft, hazy imprints of the objects within. Photograms instantly come to mind: the process of placing objects on light-sensitive paper, and directly exposing them to light. What were early experiments with a new medium then, are rendered as soft shimmering surfaces by Drury's drawings; a subversion enabled by her hyper-attentive process of drawing with graphite on paper.

"Drawing is itself a psychological act of looking," says Drury. Ready with a toolkit of objects dispersed around her studio, and pulling things in and out of her frame, Drury settles to enable an automatic, and fantastical process of translation. She plays with what appears in our field of vision with precise control. The works are entirely ambivalent – unsettling, unnerving, as though they are themselves in a process of working out an inner anxiety. There is the friction then, of what is real and what is an assembled fiction – and perhaps it is in the gap between the two that we may thoughtfully rest. Each time returning to the work anew, ready to be carried onto a new narrative. This is most apparent in the rare instances that Drury allows colour to enter the work. *Trappings for Speculation*, for instance, is elaborately layered with tiny fragments of objects and movement – a small triangular flag, or a single limb; a wine bottle with an extraordinarily long neck, a chipped vase, a candelabra heavy with too much wax. Each visit of the eye is the opening of an entirely new image: now we see a murky pond at twilight, and there, two swans arching their long necks to meet their beaks – gently, and only at the very tip. But, as always, we are drawn to return our gaze.

-Skye Arundhati Thomas