

STILL ALIVE

EDMUND DE WAAL PLACES JACOB VAN DER BEUGEL'S NEW INSTALLATION AT CONTEMPORARY APPLIED ARTS, LONDON, IN THE CONTEXT OF STILL LIFE.

Potters have ambivalent relationships with still life. The idea of stillness, stasis, *nature morte* seems to go against the need to animate objects, bring them into activity of everyday life. Surely there is a diminution of meaning, goes this argument, through the careful disposition of pots. It smacks of preciosity, this over-considered, over-articulated arrangement of vessels. Still life should be the temporary pause in a robust domestic life, a brief gathering on the draining-board, mantelpiece or crockery cupboard.

But then again there is the longing to be looked at properly, to occupy attention for more than the fleeting moment. There is the desire to make something that you return to and in which you can find more and more. There is the longing – the concept that Susan Stewart writes so well about in relation to collecting – to make a frame for understanding objects. Still life occupies a place of desire: it seems to frame meanings.

This relates directly to how the still life evolved. Intensely allegorical Dutch still life manifests the triumphant need to decode, to pay attention to every detail. A ladybird on a dying tulip, a worm in a bowl of fruit, a tarnished silver salver, a servant-girl spilling

beer: all are indicators of life on the edges of entropy. Domestic life is held together by a thread. Still life acts as *memento mori*, a warning against an over-attachment to possessions, beauty, all beautifully, exactly painted to create an object of desire.

What Jacob van der Beugel has done is to take the still life out of its aestheticised plane and bring it into a direct and unsettling relationship with *memento mori*. He has done this with great conviction and seriousness and has made this subject his own.

In the first of these we see a long shelf – two metres long – bisected by a mirror. Crammed against this mirror are a vast array of drinking vessels. We see Coke cans alongside Dutch Genever bottles alongside sake flasks from Bizen alongside wine bottles. It is like the detritus from a universal wake. You feel the excess of all this stuff, feel the inanity of so many bad times that have been had. The vessels are made from the same grey grogged clay, so that they all belong together, are bound together in a complex matrix of shadows. This also gives the impression of objects covered in a light grey dust, the ash of Herculaneum, Pompeii, Hiroshima. They are, in effect, grave goods. This is made more complicated by the fact that each one is marked with a single blood red blister. Each vessel is wounded – the metaphor of the body of the pot is made palpable in each scarred mark. And we only see these marks in the mirror that guillotines the installation. Because we can only read them in the

mirror – only see them through a glass darkly – they seem fugitive and insubstantial: are they really there or not?

In the second remarkable group installed in counterpoint to *A Memento Mori* Jacob van der Beugel gathers thirty round lidded jars ranging in scale from a few centimeters high to substantial volumes. It is not just their scale that changes – their surfaces run from a smooth skin to a completely ravaged one, coarse and scarred. These surfaces, gouged, striated, attacked with sandstones, pulverised kiln shelves, have lived. What is so interesting is that the tactile response to these jars becomes more intriguing as their surface becomes more weathered: we are invited to upend the usual progression of beauty as a descent from the smooth. Here we find the aged vessel, the pot that has had to withstand most, has the most substantial presence. In some ways this group, *From Here to There*, enacts an argument with *memento mori*, with the moralised objects that Norman Bryson has described in *Looking at the Overlooked*.

I admire these two works for their ambition as much as for their beauty. Jacob van der Beugel could make elegant lidded jars for the rest of his career, but he has chosen to explore a difficult and challenging area of practice. He understands pictures, he understands pots and he understands how to bring them into a dialogue. **CA**

