

“If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty.”

- Yoshida Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness* (1330-1332)<sup>1</sup>

As incarnations of a reflection on the transience of things, Penny Harris’ bronze works of the past five years – most of which recently came together in the form of a retrospective exhibition, *The Collected Poetry of Doubt*, at the FCA Gallery<sup>2</sup> – present an undeniable kinship with the concept exemplified in the Japanese expression *mono no aware*. The term, which roughly translates as the “pathos of things”, encompasses both an awareness of the impermanence of life and its constituents, and the belief that such awareness heightens their value, albeit bitter-sweet.

This poetic take on the fleetingness of existence, which recognizes beauty in fatality and embraces it, is in spirit far closer to the prose of 19<sup>th</sup> century French writers such as Guy de Maupassant and Théophile Gautier – ruin-lovers who revelled in nostalgic storytelling and supernatural phenomena – than to the traditional art form of the *vanitas* – still lives which conveyed religious ideals in moralistic undertones, preaching “the virtue of temperance, frugality, and hard work by admonishing the viewer to contemplate the brevity of life, the inevitability of death, and the passing of all earthly pleasures.”<sup>3</sup> While Harris’ cast assemblages of disregarded articles of clothing, vegetables, tree branches and other plant fragments do not entirely share their 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century counterparts’ Calvinist perspective, they however do act as *memento mori* and should be understood as contemporary interpretations of the concept. The artist effectively juxtaposes objects from the domestic realm, destined for use, with organic elements taken from her own garden in order to create visual metaphors of ephemera that are imbued with a strong narrative potential.

Due to their particular closeness to the body, clothes and personal hygiene tools such as toothbrushes (which are less likely shared and associated with a stronger sense of ownership) have a special status in the hierarchy of objects: more durable than things intended for consumption (which end up in destruction), they are however inclined to wear-out faster than other objects, if used on a regular basis,<sup>4</sup> and are at better odds of becoming relics. They are also often used as ersatz by contemporary visual artists, who use them to stand in for very specific individuals (most likely the owners and wearers of the displayed items) or, on the contrary, to reference to anonymous beings the viewer can promptly identify with. Recuperated

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Keene, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967) 7.

<sup>2</sup> *The Collected Poetry of Doubt*, FCA Gallery, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, March 31<sup>st</sup>-April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> H. W. Janson, *History of Art*, 5th ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995) 584.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 136-174.

items of clothing are for instance a recurrent feature in the work of French artist Christian Boltanski, who consciously uses and stages generic garments in order to construct open-ended narratives and bring forth a range of emotions within the viewer. To him, “clothes are like people”<sup>5</sup> and have the potential of materializing their absence. “*Personnes*” (a French word that can both mean “people” and “nobody”), one of his most recent and ambitious installations to date, took over the entire nave of the Grand Palais in January 2010, filling it with the deafening sound of 400 simultaneously playing heartbeats and tens of thousands of pieces of clothing.<sup>6</sup> A striking work on death, humanity and commemoration, Boltanski used simple – yet monumental – means to express the pathos of the individual being as it becomes anonymous in the abyss of death.

Plants and other elements of the natural realm consist, for their part, in some of the most enduring symbols of ephemera. Their very effectiveness as such relies on the fact that most of flora’s life cycle is significantly shorter than man’s – and thus readily observed and studied –, and acts as a constant reminder that the latter will not escape the mortal fate prescribed by what Hannah Arendt calls the “overwhelming elementary force” of nature.<sup>7</sup> In her 1958 opus, *The Human Condition*, Arendt outlines the importance of the objects destined to use (as opposed to natural things), as only they give “the human artifice the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man”.<sup>8</sup> By voluntarily estranging himself from nature in an effort to attain a certain level of psychological and material comfort, man gains an objective stance over nature which gives him the luxury to either reflect on its eternal movement or isolate himself and bask in a man-made environment.

By consciously combining fragile items of clothing that once belonged to her growing son or departed father – mostly singlets, a sock, a shirt collar and briefs – with disregarded plants that have already started to wither, Penny Harris creates delicate personal mementos of an ever fleeting and seemingly impossible to grasp present. The individual works included in *The Collected Poetry of Doubt* could be understood as just as many entries in a diary – each of them standing in for a single thought, an emotion, a moment. They do not offer full stories, only fragments each viewer has to read into in order to find their own truths. Their patina and deteriorated state make them akin to ghostly apparitions – they evoke remnants, and as such awaken a visceral fascination with archaeological sites and artefacts. One could for instance mention Pompeii, which is one of many sites but still stands out as one of the most inspiring

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<sup>5</sup> “Christian Boltanski’s Monumenta 2010,” *The Art Newspaper*, n.d., Web, 1 Apr. 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Boltanski’s installation *Personnes* was presented as part of MONUMENTA 2010 in the nave of the Grand Palais, Paris, from January 13<sup>th</sup> until February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010. A complementary episode, “*Après*” [After] was shown at the Musée d’art contemporain du Val-de-Marne from January 15<sup>th</sup> until March 28<sup>th</sup> of the same year.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt 137.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt 136.

tragedies since its excavation began in 1748.<sup>9</sup> Many were moved by a short walk through the streets of this ghost town, and many more shall be bewildered in the upcoming centuries, unless of course another major disaster strikes the premises.

What makes the ruins of Pompeii so bewitching to this day is that they were not simply abandoned and left to deteriorate – they did not go through centuries of looting or endured years of use at the hand of countless generations of inhabitants. On the contrary, they were preserved intact – as intact as a volcanic eruption can leave a town – until today, frozen in time, serving visitors with a glimpse of the true daily life of a Roman citizen under the reign of Titus (79-81 AD). Presenting visitors with more than just “what was”, those ruins confront them with another present, with an absolute certainty that “it was” and that time conquers all – *tempus omnia vincit*.

A few art historians have tackled with this particular concept that Rosalind Krauss alluded to as a “paradox of a presence seen as past”,<sup>10</sup> and which so perfectly designates not only Pompeii but Penny Harris’ cast works. By choosing to cast her carefully selected garments and plants in bronze, using the ancient lost-wax technique, Harris added yet another level of intricacy to her already very rich *memento mori*: each sculpture of the corpus is a *mise-en-abîme*, a *memento mori* both in content – as previously demonstrated – and in form.

In fact, according to Georges Didi-Huberman, a French philosopher and art historian specializing in the trace and the index, the imprint is the result of a mechanical process that inevitably suggests death and that simultaneously embodies multiple temporalities.<sup>11</sup> Behind a deceptively simple façade, the imprint is complex: as opposed to verisimilitude or *mimesis*, its resemblance with the referent was obtained by direct physical contact. It therefore doesn’t only maintain an exceptionally strong connection with its referent (potentially exponentially increasing the impact or aura of the latter), but constantly refers to the instant of contact. To consider the index (be it in the form of a soft-ground etching, a lost-wax casting or simply a footprint in a concrete sidewalk) is thus to systematically witness the collision of two distinct presents – the present of the viewer and the instant the referent imprinted the matrix. It is a site of constant tension, a “fundamental anachronism” that illustrates both contact and loss, proximity and distance, presence and absence.

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<sup>9</sup> Two contemporary sculptural works for instance simultaneously come to mind when considering the very famous plaster casts of corpses found in the Garden of the Fugitives in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: first, body casts showed in an unknown venue by Canadian artists David Moore and Françoise Sullivan in 1977; and second the very striking *Lovers on a Bed II* (1970) by American artist George Segal. See the catalogues *David Moore – Françoise Sullivan* (n.p., 1977); and Martin Friedman, “George Segal: Proletarian Mythmaker”, *George Segal: Sculptures* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1978) 19.

<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2”, *October 4* (Autumn, 1977) 65.

<sup>11</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, ed., *L’Empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps. Histoire de l’art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Minuit, 2000); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Être crâne. Lieu, contact, pensée, sculpture* (Paris: Minuit, 2000).

Penny Harris' collection of uncanny remnant-like sculptures comes up as a strong open-ended reflection on time and humanity. From thing to object to work of art, the items she submitted to her careful and systematic selection process have undergone the ultimate transformation – they went from being used to being consciously excluded from the contingencies of daily life, from transience to permanence, from nondescript to irreplaceable and unique. Their newly acquired permanence acts as an efficient reminder of the destruction and oblivion they were destined to. They have become poetic metaphors of both the overwhelming elementary force of nature and of the paralyzing anxiety one might feel in the face of death. They foretell what is to come and stand witness to what was lost. They embody the pathos of things.

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