

A PROFOUND SENSE OF STRANGENESS

Richard Cork

Growing up in the primordial verdancy of the New Forest, Kate Atkin must have become fascinated by trees at an early stage in her development. And while studying for an MA in photography at the Royal College of Art, she experienced a life-changing revelation after taking a Polaroid shot of ‘this great big anthropomorphic looking, pollarded chestnut tree.’ Although Atkin sensed that her snapshot was important, she had no idea how to use it. Then, quite suddenly, she started a large and meticulous pencil drawing called *Study: Horse Chestnut (Aesculus Hippocastanum)*. While working on it, ‘I had the realisation of exactly what I was going to do. I think that was October 2004, the most exciting month of my life.’ The drawing itself became very labour-intensive, and the densely-worked care lavished on its detailed construction was far greater than the swift, almost unthinking spontaneity of her original snapshot. Looking at the drawing now, we realise that it has a permanency which the Polaroid could never possess. At the same time, though, this drawing is filled with a profound sense of strangeness. The tree looks like a sculptural creature gesturing wildly with its limbs, but the lower branches dangle with an almost despondent limpness.

In her subsequent drawings, Atkin became deeply preoccupied with the marks of damage she found on trees. Her New Forest childhood gave her no illusions about the natural world, whose occupants are often stricken and poised on the very edge of terminal disintegration. For a while, she became haunted by a quotation from Henry Neville’s: ‘*In Multitudes, Disorders Will Grow.*’ And when her father suffered a tragically premature death from inoperable cancer, Atkin’s obsession with mortality deepened still further.

Even so, the awareness of frailty running through her work is countered by an insistence on regeneration. These rigorously crafted drawings are built to last, and her new pencil images are filled with defiant, unpredictable vitality. One of the most monumental, *Starling*, is based on a photograph taken by Atkin of a sweet chestnut she discovered in Greenwich Park. She makes no attempt to hide the fact that the tree

is bowing under its own weight. Isolated on the otherwise empty sheet of paper, it clearly feels tortured by an affliction. Yet the tree is twisting and turning back on itself, with a convoluted unrest which, conveys vigour as well as suffering. It remains defiant, even resilient. Atkin's use of a 9b pencil is so intense, in some places, that it becomes inky and velvety in blackness. Nothing can detract from this stubborn resolve, not even the possibility that the tree is either vomiting or choking on its own ailing, bloated bark.

By no means all Atkin's new drawings are as disturbing as *Starling*. One of them, a commandingly large image called *The Slut*, is alive with interchangeable limbs which all appear erotically suggestive. Flaunting a provocative finger, a kicked-up leg and a horsy mouth, this outrageous apparition even seems to be wearing a Viking hat.

Atkin's undoubted sense of humour is becoming more apparent than it was earlier in her career. And this playful wit also enlivens an enigmatic *Reverse Self-Portrait*.

Unlike the tree-inspired images, this drawing takes as its starting-point the artist's hair, plaited in an elaborate invention of her own. She sculpted the hair, weaving it into a circle which ends up shaped like an egg. The sources of stimulus for *Reverse Self-Portrait* include Gerhard Richter's painting of Betty, who turns away from the spectator with quiet defiance. But Atkin was also inspired by visiting the Bronzino exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. His drawings of youths with luminous moon-faces, shining out of mid-coloured paper, depend for their hypnotic effect on highlights and shadows. So does *Reverse Self-Portrait*, which ends up tantalising the viewer with its refusal to disclose even a hint of the artist's own face.

The execution of such a consummate drawing entails a formidable amount of sustained concentration on Atkin's part. Only someone with extraordinary reserves of energy could produce it, and she worked on *Reverse Self-Portrait* freehand for an entire month, unaided by projecting onto the paper the photograph she had initially taken of this elaborate concoction. An enormous number of pencils were worn down while the artist laboured on this demanding tour de force. Atkin has never thrown away any of her used-up utensils, and she recently decided to acknowledge their importance by making a sculpture called *Bottle and Used Pencils*. Back in 1964, Marcel Broodthaers piled a number of pigmented shells in a painted iron pot and called the outcome *Casserole and Closed Mussels*. As a tribute to Broodthaers, an artist she has always admired, Atkin stacked all her pencil stubs inside a vodka bottle.

In one respect, she wryly intended to acknowledge the fact that it is absurd to spend so much time drawing. Yet in another sense, the result is an act of homage to the enduring power of graphite. For the discarded stubs rise up irrepressibly into space above the bottle's neck, and they are crowned by its red metal cap stamped with the words 'Glen's The Exciting Vodka.'

A similar spirit of unconventional celebration can likewise be found in the larger sculptural objects Atkin has produced. That is why she is calling her Trinity Contemporary exhibition *London Pleasures*, emphasizing a move away from the darker concerns of earlier work. The show's name is taken from the title of an epic poem in George Orwell's *Keep The Aspidistra Flying*, where a bi-polar poet believes it is the finest work he has ever written and then, with equal conviction, becomes tormented by a suicidal sense of failure. Atkin sympathizes with Orwell's poet, and has fortified herself over the last couple of years by 'fighting against my own good taste, or nervousness about whether certain objects are worthy material for my own work.'

In Wyoming, where she enjoyed a fruitful residency, her eyes focused on an old wooden wheel hanging above a pool table. Although she spent a lot of time searching for possible material in Wyoming and taking photographs of everything that arrested her attention, Atkin decided against training her lens on this wagon wheel because it had already been 'sculpted.' But the very next morning she woke up convinced that it was the finest object she had seen. Admiring its artisan quality, she was also fascinated to learn that pioneer Americans saw the wheel as a symbol of land-grabbers being emasculated and turned into furniture. Hence her decision to make *Cog*, a remarkably heavy sculpture where the plywood is left exposed on the edges to emphasize the idea of layers. The emphatic bolts underneath testify to Atkin's confidence as a maker, originally encouraged by her father who was an engineer and taught her how to manipulate a wide range of working tools. She wants *Cog* to provoke a visceral reaction in its viewers, who will find it leaning casually against the gallery wall and displaying a mixture of heaviness and delicacy.

The unpredictable range of subjects and emotions explored in Atkin's new sculptures is impressive. On a large scale, *A Face Like Julius Caesar and Pale Green Hair* is actually based on a mussel shell yet resembles a giant pair of wings. Visitors to the exhibition will be able to walk inside it, and either feel trapped by its confines or

fascinated by their ability to watch everything from this shadowy, secretive shelter. Atkin herself likens the wings to a pair of thighs, thereby adding to the sculpture's complex meaning. But she has also made a far smaller piece called *Prawn* which resembles a skeletal structure bending over and leaning on a plinth. Curving away from the gallery wall, it may well strike up a dialogue with the equally rounded *Cog*. As for *It is very hot. The colour dazzles you*, the chandelier-like sculpture hanging from the ceiling on a chain, this mesmeric form was inspired by the lanterns outside New York Public Library, a building she describes as 'a palace for books.' Atkin has ensured that, when displayed in the gallery, there will be enough space to walk past the sculpture and stand behind it.

The most surprising of all these three-dimensional works is *The Umbrella of The Gardener's Aunt is in The House*. Atkin, who now lives in an East End studio next to a traffic-riddled road as noisy as a motorway, gazed out of her window early one day and noticed a real hub-cap propped up on the pavement below. It had probably come to rest there after being flung off a passing vehicle, and she ignored it for a couple of weeks. But then, like the wagon wheel in Wyoming, this humble object suddenly became fascinating. So Atkin rescued the unwanted hub-cap. Examining it with care, she discovered that it had been 'Made In Taiwan', of plastic pretending to be aluminium. Intrigued both by the image and by the attempt to make it resemble an alloy wheel, she realised that this apparently banal object was fundamentally a very bizarre blend of 'macho' toughness, cosmetic allure and a halo-like interior. Her own version is made of solid aluminium, filed and de-burred so that it ended up gleaming. Yet Atkin has not attempted to disguise the 'fakery' of the drawing she attached to this sculpture, and its strangeness will be intensified by the spotlight illuminating *The Umbrella of The Gardener's Aunt is in The House*. So an impoverished object, hurled off the road like a rejected accessory, has now undergone a momentous and mysterious transformation.

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