

Listening to mute objects

1. Over time, Bristlecone Pines in eastern Nevada's Great Basin National Park have acquired names such as Buddha, Socrates and Methuselah. This species of tree is extraordinarily hardy, able to withstand extremes of heat, cold and drought. And this is how a geography student in the 1960s came to study Prometheus. He believed examining the rings of this particular tree would reveal how climate in the region had changed over time. He began boring a sample, but soon, his tool became stuck in the hard, twisted trunk. He determined the only way to retrieve it, was to cut down the tree. Later, studying the rings in his hotel room, it quickly became evident that Prometheus was around 4,900 years old. He had felled the world's oldest tree.
2. The journalist Cullen Murphy was recently granted exclusive access to the Vatican Museum at night. He was on a quest to understand the behind-the-scenes of the museum, and to experience its extraordinary collection after hours. Murphy recounts how a comment made to him by the head conservator resonated throughout his visit. 'Reflecting on the biography of every object – the unique journey each has made to this place across miles and years – [he] repeated an observation he'd once heard... "Time," he said, "is an emotion."'

Being in the presence of a tree that began its life during the Bronze Age, or to walk the rooms where the creative rivalry between Michelangelo and Raphael played out, can be breath-taking. It is hard not to imagine these objects and spaces having consciousness, with stories to tell from over years that far outstretch the human lifespan. Being in their presence becomes a means of sharing their history.

It is with this in mind that I come to Kate Atkin's new body of work. She is an artist that contemplates the lives of mute objects through the practice of drawing. But in deliberate contrast to the profound, she is drawn to the unremarkable: a domestic tree, pruned hedge, or mass-produced planter. These forms are simplified in ways that emphasise their order and symmetry. Viewers encounter large, almost iconic forms; each drawing, a single-object still life.

The drawings take shape through the accumulation of marks. The different registers, between the image as a whole, and how complex information has been interpreted through hundreds of lines and smudges, is essential to the work's meaning. Atkin describes the process, involving "the constant walking back and forth – a 1000 times a day...guessing how [the drawing] will look 20 feet away, when I'm making it at arm's length." She sees a relationship between drawing and its relationship to growing, "as a plant would grow one line at a time - so would a drawing." But instead of faithfully depicting a tree, the drawings end up on the border between abstraction and representation, an outcome of the labour-intensive process, and how she simplifies the image to produce an enigmatic appearance:

"An object is a thing which exists in the world. Its physical presence lends itself to being described in language, but what if you spend long enough looking at that thing that it starts to lose its meaning in the same way that repeating a word enough times can suspend its meaning. The word just becomes a sound – and then I try and draw that."

Her work sits within the legacy of still life, where for centuries, artists have imbued objects with meaning. Giorgio Morandi is an important inspiration, an artist who found poetry in a banal collection of jars and vessels. In Atkin's case, there is a preoccupation with how order is imposed within the everyday. Her drawings create a meditative space between the routines of trimming back the hedge and walking past it every day, visually interpreted through the combination of extreme stylisation and repetitive mark-making.

The time and labour devoted to these works may be interpreted as an epic, obsessive and absurd endeavour. Yet at the same time, I see an important philosophical, even ethical positioning that underlies this approach, where the artist's practice attempts to understand our place in the world differently. Could that moment, when meaning is suspended, spark in the imagination, a more 'side-by-side' relationship between humans, trees, bushes and things, and what that world order might be like?

In response to the cutting down of Prometheus, the writer Michael P. Cohen noted how:

"...artists [do not] presume as much as scientists [do] about the importance of their activity...Artists, interested in the outward form of the trees, have less need, perhaps, to possess them materially. Yet the artist, like the scientist, also abstracts something from the tree and is interested in some law, harmony or form which can be used in an aesthetic representation."

In a further effort to describe an artist's approach, Cohen cites a passage by Jorge Luis Borges. It sits well in relation to Atkin's process:

"*The Garden of Forking Paths* is an enormous guessing game, or parable, in which the subject is time. The rules of the game forbid the use of the word itself. To eliminate a word completely, to refer it by means of inept phrases and obvious paraphrases, is perhaps the best way of drawing attention to it."

Kate Atkin offers a new body of work that explores law, harmony and form, using an appealing combination of conviction and humility. Through skill, care and unflinching commitment, she has created drawings that manage to both dwell upon and transcend time. The results from afar are absurdly simple; up close, obsessively intricate. They offer grace, they offer insight; an artist's way of imagining the world anew.

Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, 1956, published by Grove Press in English, 1962.

Michael P. Cohen, *A Garden of Bristlecones: Tales of Change in the Great Basin*, University of Nevada Press, Reno and Las Vegas, p. 76, 1998.

Cullen Murphy, *Night at the Vatican: After tourists go home, a museum's collection tells its own story*, *The Atlantic*, June 2023, p. 60.

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