

Dropping off and coming to
by Rebecca Geldard

"Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it."

*Virginia Woolf

The idea of living consciously through dream time sets the mind into overdrive imagining what such an overlap of states might signify. We do to some degree dream in the everyday – pilot through variably conscious of the present and the workings of our own internal repositories – but most of us with a view to escaping the present reality rather than learning more about out how we might be shaping it. Perhaps there is an optimum point on the consciousness spectrum, between waking and sleeping reality, for remembering; accessing the hard-to-reach personal data that defines who we are? Emma Talbot's investigative drawing-based practice situates the viewer within this nebulous territory – the sense of sliding between states of being in a given moment and of recall.

I Would Rather Not Go Back To The Old House, TV (2013)

This image of a family at home, viewed through a window, elicits the feeling of being both inside and outside of the pictorial action and of memory. We might be riding with Dickens' ghosts as they do a drive-by through the past. So much seems familiar, if not directly, then in a filmic or literary sense. Possible connections bring with them an awareness of the kitchen-sink cycle in full loop: from the repetitive struggles in Shelagh Delaney's 'A Taste of Honey' to Kate Tempest's 'Circles', via Mike Leigh, The Smiths and a slight whiff of 'The Good Life'. Is it the television that has the boy and girl caught zombie-to-the-moment, as inferred by the ray effect of the light emitted from it, or the authoritarian presence of others? For, at closer inspection, the backs of two heads bob into the foreground like portentous balloons. Through panes of glass, this evening ritual appears to have been portioned – images reflected from the outside world interrupt the action within. Lines – of power, communication, fire and sight – offer multiple routes in and out of the frame. It's as if the mind maps, of what is occurring and the future plot points of its manifestation, have been folded, creases crossing, one into the other.

For all the possible evidence of trauma, disappointment, passion and pain, it's the ordinariness of life's significant moments that comes to the fore in Talbot's works. Her observations of how time and matter are perceived in particular points of pinch reveal that even the most extraordinary situation might be punctuated with the bland banality of the day-to-day. In the dream world there are no rules as to the appearance and behaviour of material things. Similarly, in times of heightened awareness, the same might be said of the waking one; that pervasive sense of leakage between worlds as the mind negotiates the unreality of a situation, all the while surrounded by familiar markers that denote business as usual. People suffer in suburban houses, experience elicit trysts in public parks and question the point of it all while washing up. Talbot's exquisite painterly rendering of mundane things – leaded-light windows, upholstery, cutlery draws – speaks of how such details matter in ways we are powerless to control. Out of nowhere, evidence of a certain hue, a sound, a smell might render an individual helpless to the effects of the past.

Talbot is candid about the influence of her own life on her work. In 2014, as part of the *Intimacy Unguarded* research project they co-run at Central Saint Martins, she and Dr Jo Morra organised a one-day symposium on critical approaches to autobiography and memoir involving writers, scientists, theorists, as well as other artists such as Lindsay Seers who draw from their own personal histories. And, like Seers, she is interested in how we remember and how processes of recollection are shaped by the many forms of narrative invention and image making we are

exposed to. It seems odd that the personal, especially in an era of oversharing via social media, still feels like it should be written in inverted commas when talking about contemporary art, especially the work of women artists. For discussion of such inevitably leads to use of equally loaded words such as feminine and domestic, words I have in the past been asked to remove from essays for fear of pigeon-holing a practice or limiting the range of response.

Risk appears an inherent part of the narrative and its pictorial construction. Emotional highs and lows are brought to bear on paper, canvas and silk; the difficult to fathom details of the sleeping mind wrestled out of memory and into aesthetically curious, or physically tangible things. Yet, the visual tropes in play, the knowledge of what happens when wet paint meets dry or porous surfaces, when text becomes image, or personal subject matter is cast in collective light, appear to have been investigated to the point of finding freedom from the past lives of art and the iron teeth of the making mind.

Looking through the artist's back catalogue, therefore, can give one a sense of having arrived at a privileged point in Talbot's working process. It is acutely evident from the instinctual, fluent feel of her imagery and from conversations with the artist that serious time and personal investment has gone into the difficult job of locating and bringing thoughts into visible form. This is not to suggest that this particular body of work represents a significant stage or end point. The evidence of full stops in her painted sentences and apparent deliberation over their manufacture serve to signify tricky points of pause, or the idea of finality: dots left from loaded brushes deliver equally loaded messages.

Shorthand is a woefully inadequate word to describe the dedicated distillation of visual forms into a highly resonant language. It implies the notion of shortcuts rather than hard-won comprehension. Nonetheless, like the script that enables quick capture of spoken information, Talbot's shorthand speaks in a coded and minimally efficient voice all of its own. People and things, reduced to the bare linear bones of recallable data, appear free to exist, in cartoonish form, outside the conventions and expectations we might otherwise impose upon them. The pink claw-like hands of girls in love and trouble, for example, speak much more of flailing in the dark than any attempted rendering of an actual veiny, fleshy one likely could.

The Interpretation Of Dreams (2016)

On two panels of silk still in the process of being painted, a doll-booted girl with multiple limbs appears to pinwheel, but as if she has recently been released from gravity like the central character of a zoetrope demonstration. Her hair fans out in the same manner as the suggestive flower and mushroom forms sprouting all around. She might be Alice falling through time or just a girl who's had the misfortune of finding herself in the wrong memory. Executed in green and red lines, her form speaks of how we read imagery, what colour and light do to our eyes and a consumer phase for three-dimensional photographic posters that required the use of glasses. Freud's words appear around her in poignant clusters. In Talbot's empathically constructed, elegantly loopy script – from a past world of foreign penpals and hand-written letters – they lead us towards literary rather than empirically sewn-up sources.

Unless there are triggers for remembering, or deadlines imposed upon the terms of recollection, many of us do not actively choose, like Talbot, to visit the "still room"; to quietly inspect its ordering systems, what's been filed and bring back images from the brink of being forgotten:

"We cling to the present out of wariness of the past. And why not, after all? We get confused. We need such escape as we can find. But there is a deeper need yet, I think ... to enter that still room within us all where the past lives on as a part of the present, where the dead are alive again, where we are most alive ourselves to turnings and to where our journeys have brought us."

****Frederick Buechner**

What if there's nothing in there, what if what's in there is destined to destabilise the status quo? I like the idea of Freud's "psychical material", a description Talbot highlights in new work 'The Interpretation of Dreams', as a stand-in for our mental snow globe fragments – the cerebral gubbins we have neither adequate words or pictures for. Talbot brings this matter into being in ways that remind us of the interconnected and collective nature of human stories. That she has chosen to situate this body of work within the realms of psychoanalysis may be fitting for the exhibition context, but chimes entirely with the exploratory nature of her practice to date.

Freud aligned the analyst's role with that of an archaeologist. Where some might dig their way into and out of the psyche, I imagine Talbot's mental journeys, full of tangled lines and complex knots, more akin to fishing. The sensory detritus caught in the virtual net of her trips, whether jean pockets and how they sit slightly sideways on the bum, to the feel of piano keys on the day of a funeral, is all administrated and handled with the same level of regard. Nothing appears superfluous in the accounts she chooses to share.

Annunciation (Diana In The Dark) (2011)

Their butterbean heads are big, the period chairs small and tablecloth pleats hang with the weight of a much heavier material than fabric. Female faces without features and an array of household props reveal much about the situation, irrespective of any titular clues. 'Diana', as both a possible real-life person and mythical muse, straddles the associative breach between recent and ancient history. In the low candlelight of an evening, in the clearing up moments after a meal, something of significance is being shared. Whether as the result of a pregnant pause in conversation or a verbal revelation, the observational mood is of change, a life knot being unravelled. Despite the domestic ceremony of the set-up, this is no celebration. Glass goblets delineated in Prussian blue strokes appear part of the surface of the scene rather than in it, forever out of graspable, clinkable reach.

Such is the emotional response elicited by Talbot's palette, her use of specific tones and colourways, one can at points imagine paint as an ingestible or breathable substance. Perhaps if one were to handle an image, very fine, spore-like clouds of pigment might fall and resettle in a different, but equally compelling, formation on the floor.

End Notes:

* Virginia Woolf, *Street Haunting: A London Adventure*, *The Yale Review*, October 1927

** Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember: Uncollected Pieces*, HarperOne, February 1984

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