

Still attached at all four corners

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‘Still attached at all four corners’. It sounds a plausible proposition for a sculpture show, relating perhaps to the affixture of materials to an object, a statement of fact. And yet the presence of the word ‘still’ plants a seed of uncertainty, the prospect that whatever is being tethered down may well fly away. Learning that the exhibition’s title derives from a sentence in Virginia Woolf’s 1929 essay *A Room of One’s Own* only compounds the instability, Woolf being the doyen of the unboundaried. ‘Fiction is like a spider’s web’ she writes, ‘attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners.’

Language is evidently significant to Frances Richardson’s practice. Her lyrical titles can throw one off, initially seeming at odds with the quotidian nature of her materials and unfussy Minimalist aesthetic of her work. But the apparent simplicity of her objects - nothing is extraneous, frivolous, excessive - belies a complexity of ideas. Richardson is, after all, a profound thinker. In the course of several conversations about the show, our topics ranged from the Greek myth of Prometheus to the nature of time and the meaning of existence. Among the books in her studio are Foucault’s *This is Not a Pipe*, Arthur C. Danto’s *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* by Giorgio Agamben, giving clues to her interest in the philosophical quandary about the essence of things, how they are cited, represented and named. Such concerns underpin her practice, while leaving room for poetry.

Descending into the windowless, tomblike space of this exhibition, giant brown moth forms appear to hover and cling to the walls around a makeshift pile of lit pallets on the floor, evoking a fire that could lure them to their doom. The ‘moths’ are titled *And what of your soul?*, introducing a metaphysical element, and the fire sculpture is called *Carcass: Object for thinking about transience*, summoning ideas of carrion and destruction. A white table-ish sculpture, *Object for thinking about staying*, indicates domesticity, habitation, but the moths and fire belong outside in nature - or they would were they not made of veneer and MDF.

What are we to make of this collection of objects with their cryptic titles? And what is still attached at all four corners? The 'moth's' wings to the wall? The imaginary to reality? Sanity? Meaning? Keeping Woolf's metaphor in mind, it feels appropriate to anchor this discussion under four themes that characterise Richardson's practice.

splitting open a moment in time

Freud's essay *On Transience*, written in 1915, has been at the back of Richardson's mind over the summer. In it, Freud cites a conversation with a poet whose enjoyment of beauty in life was marred by the knowledge of its impermanence. Freud takes issue with this pessimistic anticipation of loss, positing that beauty must be cherished because of its very transience. That fundamental question of how to approach living and being, is pertinent today in our own fraught time of war, climate emergency and economic crisis. So it is hardly surprising that Richardson is making elemental works reflecting on life and death, fire and souls.

Temporality is an ongoing preoccupation of hers. Time as measured by materials and non-human species. Moth time and tree time. Woolf's short story 'The Death of the Moth', (the author is a recurrent touchstone), prompts the artist to think about how we perceive time. Woolf describes a moth's final frenetic dance before its inevitable demise as human existence rolls inexorably on in the background, a time span that contrasts eons versus moments. Richardson uses a lot of burr veneers - layers of wood sliced through the knotty growths that have accumulated on a trunk over various periods - which offer a glimpse of time distinct from the yearly rings of trees. As she explains, 'you're pulling open that moment and seeing time in a different way from the inside.'

it is about the encounter

Richardson presents her sculptures without bombast, preferring sparse elegance to staginess. Amid the restraint, there is nonetheless a quiet insistence that we engage with the material objects. Close scrutiny from different angles is rewarded: walking around the sculptures reveals unexpected flashes of colour or a discreet shadow cast by the 'table', echoing the 'moths' on the wall above. One particularly flamboyant 'moth' stands out from the others, its drooping moustache-like wings caught in mid-air as if fluttering on a breeze, implying a lightness it

doesn't possess. Richardson has playfully hidden this one around a corner so only the blue underside is visible from the entrance. Placed at different heights, from ceiling to floor, the sculptures invite a bodily navigation around them. The oversize 'moths' have protruding spines that encroach disconcertingly on the visitors' space: the effect is somehow to animate them as if they are readying to take off, even though we know they are static veneer objects.

Richardson has largely steered clear of wood, despite having trained with a master wood carver in Nigeria in the 1990s, favouring instead modest materials like Correx or MDF - things that don't have a history. Yet she has found herself drawn to veneers. Arranged here in pairs, the sheets of veneer exhibit bewitching symmetrical markings reminiscent of those on moth wings, complete with 'eyespot' that deter predators. Equally, one can lose oneself in the miniature cartographies that conjure mesas, contours and rivulets across the rich veneer surfaces. These rippling earthy patterns contrast with the white lustre of the Correx 'table' and jumble of firewood slats with their charred-looking cords on the floor. There's a keen visual pleasure to be had from the interplay of geometries and different materials, detached from their usual urban building context.

the materials serve to displace the image

Moths hold a longstanding fascination for Richardson; she often rescues them. Drab cousins of the butterfly, they lack its greeting card optimism, being associated with the nocturnal realm. Day to day, they are perceived as a nuisance, eating our clothes and dive-bombing lamps, hence their symbolisation in some cultures of death, in others of transformation, rebirth or wisdom. But Richardson's 'moths' do not aspire to convince as moths; they are made from wood veneers recalling 1970s domestic interiors. As the artist says, 'it is the language of furniture, not the language of organic vertebrae. They don't look like moths but there is that recognition of a winged thing, it could be an airplane or anything else'.

We see a similar displacement of image and meaning happening with the 'fire' composed of pallet-like MDF structures and the Correx 'table'. The same proportions and size as a breeze-block topped with two paving slabs, the table form suggests heft but it is held together by cocktail sticks and kebab skewers in a delightful subversion of materials. Its translucent airiness gives it the appearance of being not quite present. Unlike the 'table', the quotations of pallets

are closer to the original object. Richardson regards these as ‘drawings’ in space since they have the form and material appearance of pallets but none of their structural integrity. Something of Magritte’s mischievous jiggery-pokery with the pipe that isn’t a pipe seems to be at work here. We are asked to ponder how Richardson’s 3D ‘drawing’ differs from a replica, an interpretation, or indeed the original. Neither quite abstraction nor representation, her objects occupy a liminal realm between the rational and irrational.

maybe the edges of our existence are not that separate

When she was devising this show, the Greek myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and created humankind, kept insinuating itself into Richardson’s thoughts. She was also reminded of art historical images of the goddess Minerva bestowing a butterfly on Prometheus’s creations to animate them. Psyche happens to mean both butterfly and soul in Greek, hence her choice of title *And what of your soul?* for her moth sculptures, which at the same time raises existential questions. During our meandering discussions about the exhibition, we talked about creation myths, the hazy edges of our bodily existence and ways a life might persist after death in phrases or memories carried on by friends and relatives. Richardson strives to memorialise and give material form to the ephemeral, in her drawings of piles of rubbish for instance. When she chances upon them in the street, she photographs them, knowing they will vanish in a day or two, ending up, as we all will, as atoms within a vast primordial soup.

Carcass: Object for thinking about transience, then, might be viewed as a reference to creation, or perhaps the artistic process itself. While the scene could be read as dystopian, perhaps evoking a bunker where people burn pallets for warmth following some apocalypse, for the artist the narrative is one of hope and survival.

There’s a beguiling honesty to Richardson’s work with its refusal to yield easy answers. Picking up Woolf’s spider metaphor, the artist weaves webs of association between forms, materials and real objects. Her use of near-mimicry draws us in with the comfort of familiarity, only to deliver a riddle of ambiguity in which the object seems to serve as a disguise for a series of questions larger than itself. The real world is still attached at all four corners, but only just.