If I measure it must exist

Jo Applin

Waking up after a peculiarly unsettling dream, Frances Richardson decided to record it for posterity as soon as she arrived at her studio, only too aware of the way dreams slip from sight as the night-time fugue gives way to the tasks and to-dos of morning. The dream haunted the artist: a strange, iridescent winged insect in a pool of water at the end of the garden, weighed down by eggs that suddenly hatched before her eyes. The small-winged creatures that emerged did not, as she hoped, sink from sight but instead started to cling to the grassy edges of the pool as if to save themselves. She was filled with horror yet unable to look away. Richardson recalls the sensation she felt as the large insect became hairy; she gave it one ill-judged squeeze and a 'reddish-brown' liquid started to ooze out.

The tape recording of the dream Richardson made that day – it's more of a nightmare, really – is marred by technical faults and human error that inadvertently lend it a surprisingly theatrical weight. In her haste to capture the dream – to take its measure – Richardson only half-pressed down the 'record' button as she started to speak. Anyone familiar with that now outmoded form of technology will recall the strange sounds this kind of accident produces. The resulting ten-minute-long recording is closer to a spirit visitation than a spoken account. The whirring tape sounds like a windy gale, while the slow, slurring, deep vocal thrum is closer to a monstrous moan than a human voice. As the story she was recounting built in intensity, Richardson's body reacted accordingly, her finger pressing harder on the record button without it ever quite clicking into place. A brief period of audible speech is quickly replaced by a high-pitched, keening squeal, which peters out to the dramatic sounds of a police siren as the narrative closes and Richardson relinquishes control of the button.

Things get weirder. After finishing the recording, Richardson decided to put the bins out. Pleased to have got the dream out of her head, and ready to start on her day's work, she happened upon a glass display cabinet containing a Malaysian tree-nymph: a huge, whiteish, baroque-looking butterfly. The appearance of a giant winged insect by her studio bin store so soon after capturing her dream on tape is a narrative at odds with the minimalist restraint of Richardson's sculptural practice and works on paper. By thinking the two together – the serendipitous and the sinister, the real and the surreal – I want to explore the kinds of productive

tension found in her work that at moments treads a similarly fine line. By this I mean I want to try and take the measure of Richardson's work, to borrow from the title of her exhibition: in particular, the group of sculptures that includes her wall-mounted abstract veneer 'moths' and an upturned MDF skip – wings and bins – alongside a three-dimensional rendering of a door frame, a series of minimalist strip lights and a group of works on paper.

To make the wooden skip, Richardson painstakingly measured, cut and screwed together individual pieces of MDF. After putting the final screw in place, she gently upended the structure so that it sits on one of its shorter sides, throwing its status as a container into question: skips hold junk, but they are subsequently tipped out, the unwanted contents dumped when they get too full (not unlike the kind of 'brain dump' Richardson performed by recording her dream, getting it out of her head and onto tape). It is not clear what the point is of a skip turned on its end. That small act turns it into something closer to what the artist calls a 'proposition' than a thing-in-the-world. Richardson describes the interior space of a sculpture as 'fictional'. By this I take her to mean that the inside is by its nature a constructed space, whereas exterior space, where edge and world meet, is outside the artist's agency as creator: put a sculpture outside, and the means against which scale is measured radically changes as the sky becomes the limit.

As with her MDF 'skip', Richardson calls her plywood reliefs 'moths' not because that is what they are, but mainly for want of a better word. Because Richardson is an abstract artist, not wedded to the idea that objects in the studio are in any way equivalent with things in the world – names such as 'moth' or 'skip' similarly hang around as useful placeholders. To maintain that conceptual distance, Richardson describes her 1:1 plywood renderings of familiar objects as 'drawings', as if to underline the fact that they exist as ideas adjacent or prior to the thing itself. She wonders if the word 'phantom' might not better describe the relationship her works have to the world of things; as strange echoes or shadows of the 'real thing'. They certainly aren't replicas, and to that end they boldly declare their status as fabricated forms. Materials matter to Richardson, and she spends time learning their language and nature and what they can and cannot do. Richardson makes her drawings with large sheets of unpainted MDF, a material she likes because it lacks 'integrity' and has 'no history', although she has been known to paint the screwheads a nondescript grey to 'knock back their shiny realness' and 'complement the matt surface of the MDF'. The screws are, Richardson says, 'elaborately countersunk, not a method a carpenter would use' but which ensures 'their presence is unashamedly announced'. Her works

made from MDF do not set out to ‘look like’ a door or a skip. The aim is not to trip us up but to point us elsewhere. ‘It is what it is’, as the old minimalist adage goes.

The ‘moths’, by contrast, are not quite drawings in the same sense, although they inhabit the same object world. These relief sculptures – delicate, wall-bound works – are carefully crafted from waves of shaped plywood in white oak burl, black walnut and giant redwood. The two veneers are cut from the same piece of wood and then repositioned back-to-back, so the grain patterns mirror one another in a Rorschach-style swirl of knots and rings. The two parts slot neatly together, their edges meeting to make one form. The wooden ‘wings’ undulate gently from the wall, catching the light, while the patterned surfaces call to mind both the rings that mark the life course of a tree and the camouflage pattern of a moth.

City dwellers have an uncomfortable relationship with moths. They eat our woollens and carpets. But then, moths in turn struggle with us: the LEDs that now replace older street lighting attract moths in their multitudes, only to make them easier than usual prey for bats and birds. Finding their abstract phantom-form in Richardson’s elegant veneer curves, the moth-objects are given a stillness (not unlike that of the dead, boxed tree-nymph), drawing our attention to where their edges meet the exterior world. Richardson has recently made a series of MDF ‘lamps’ – thin, rectangular beams containing strip lights – that lean against the wall: propped next to the wall-mounted moths, it is as though each is drawn to the other in this shadow-world of readymade forms in which they both are and are not the things they resemble.

Richardson also draws in the more familiar sense of the term. Previous works hew closely to an abstract geometric form of mark making, delicate repetitions and wobbly grids rendered in pencil on sheets of cotton paper. She tends to number, not name, her drawings, insisting on their status as conceptual propositions. One series echoes the patterning seen in the sliced-through trunk of a tree, the individual rings spreading in tentacular sprawls from the centre out, marked by close-knit pencilled lines of plus and minus signs. More recently, she has made a group of delicate ink-wash works of bundled piles of cardboard boxes and packaging. Richardson captures the discarded cardboard, destined for the dustbin or skip, in subtle shades of grey.

To take the measure of something is to step back and look askance; to approach one’s subject with a critical eye and questioning attitude. It also describes the practical means by which things – sculpture, boxes, skips – come into being, pencil and tape measure in hand. When

Richardson takes the measure of something she moves back and forth – between discussing the pragmatics and plausibility of production (she works alone with her tools in her studio) and the latest book she happens to be reading, lines carefully underlined for later contemplation (she was reading Giorgio Agamben on Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' the last time I visited). She thinks out loud, testing the limits of a thought in the same way she takes the measure of a length of MDF or puzzles over how to produce a flattened loop from a length of copper tape. Hearing her describe and explain how, for instance, a life-size sculpture of a skip rendered in MDF is not, in fact, a skip or a replica of a skip but a drawing makes for an exhilarating conversation about the epistemological stakes involved in calling something a sculpture, a model or a copy. It also involves talking about skips – where she last saw one, the surprisingly varied number of models that exist, and the intricate dance involved in switching out one full skip for an empty one that she sees performed on a semi-regular basis on the forecourt beneath her flat's living room window.

At the same time, when Richardson considers whether the interior of a sculpture is de facto 'fictional', important questions about meaning and narrative, inside and out, and the limits and edges of the work of art are raised. It is heady stuff rooted in the act of making as much as thinking. The lack of history embodied in a sheet of MDF captures something of this compression of ideas, this flattening out where all ideas and thoughts become, for a time, equal. History is there, though, in Richardson's work, but as a phantom that comes in and out of focus. Integrity is there, too – by the bucket load (during lockdown, the artist made a group of stunning ink drawings of individual metal buckets and pails titled *Still Thinking*, a pendant piece of sorts to the drawings of cardboard boxes made around the same time).

During a weekend of open studio visits a few years back, Richardson, in part dreading the idea of hosting a stream of strangers in her private workspace, decided to tackle the issue head on by physically engaging her visitors. The artist took an upright, open-fronted wooden box, made to her own bodily measurements, turned it away from the door and stood inside it, waiting to be discovered (or not). The main response she received from visitors, after surprise, was the request to take her place and to themselves have a go at occupying the interior space of the box. Richardson documented the results with her camera as differently sized bodies spread and contracted, bent over and stretched out to fill the four corners of the upright column. The work is a riff on Robert Morris's *Untitled* (*Box for Standing)* from 1961, in which the obdurate

abstraction of the minimalist column was made theatrical, spectacular, in the final reveal that Morris's body was contained within. For some critics this pointed precisely to the problem of minimalist sculpture: it never could manage to evict the idea of the body, or of the theatrical, from its form. Richardson thinks differently about those relationships. If anything, she is a conceptual artist: her works – moths, skips, I-beams, boxes and buckets – are the result of a thought process, although the level of care and precision that goes into their making challenges the idea of them as afterthoughts or artefacts of that conceptual process. They are a world apart from the baroque theatrics of nightmarish flying insects and disorienting dreams, offering, rather, a cooled-down take on events. We might think of her three-dimensional drawings as 'after' or 'phantom' effects: material, measured responses to the object world around us.