

PRECIOUS OBJECTS

catalogue essay by **Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe**

a small fortune, 1996

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Gabrielle Jennings seems to me to work with an idea of narrativity-- in which narrative is occasionally present as such, more often sort of, rarely not at all-- as an affair of images adapted to the construction of a subject. An earlier prose work of Jennings describes her and her friends' evolution from coveting and buying model horses to coveting and stealing hood ornaments like the Mustang sign off parked cars. This would be maturation as the passage from a relatively uncomplicated fascination with an object of empathy, and other kinds of projection, to a more elaborate relationship with an object which was never anything but a sign whose signifiatory capacity is extended or inflected in a way its originators may not have anticipated by its being stolen. How it got there changes what it means. Such is the fate of signs which end up in works of art-- although not of those which end up in art which is about the end of art, but that's another narrative.

Jennings exploits the principle by which all images defer: to the possibility of meaning unfolding in time; to the potential of another image to illuminate through supplementation and contradiction the one which is actually to hand; and, to the meaning which could (inevitably must, it's there the minute the thought occurs) follow from combining any particular image with another which it suggests, which is to say calls to mind (which itself raises the question of whether it does anything of the sort, or if instead one should say that the image never means anything other than the meaning the mind has for it before it has in fact encountered it, a meaning presumably put there by other images or events once--i.e., at some alleged earlier time to which it must now defer-- contiguous with it) or equally which quite arbitrarily, and as it were coincidentally, converge with it. In Jennings' work this principle is to a considerable degree a function of relationships of interdependence between the phenomenal and the clue.

The phenomenal, in Jennings, both this recent work and elsewhere, tends to operate along an axis which has lightness at one end and density at the other, and where both extremes may occur in the same substance or thing: for example, gold-- "god" with "l" for larceny inserted into it-- as a dense substance and substantiality which is simultaneously filled with light. The clue is always to a sensation associated with a point of view, which is to say, to a subjectivity which finds itself in its attentiveness. The one emerges from the other. Using the photocopier she enlarges a feather, hair, a leaf, until they become unrecognizable except as pattern. They will recur as movements and density, found on different surfaces. They are patterns derived from objects already weightless, as close to the insubstantiality of the sign as things may be, united in certain respects once one knows whence they derive (they all, for example, have a relationship with the wind, air, and lightness, not to mention, since projection is involved here, figure in flight, figure walking or running, figure planted in the ground). As such, they are patterns which stand for sensations, and in this conversion of a surface into a phenomenon one is given a clue to the conditions of a subjectivity which narrativises itself as an assemblage of deferring images--including imagelessness images which tellingly originate in specific images. A subjectivity made out of relationships to surfaces and trajectories, grounded in an idea of

attentiveness where what is being attended to is a relationship between very delicate things and qualities.

Delicate but I think not esoteric. Jennings' work presents the ephemeral as matter of fact (which could be seen as the phenomenal as material facture). It does so in the course of requiring one to think about recurrence as at once recognition and recall-- as re-thinking and re-presenting-- and, in the same breath, as an aspect of one or another kind of projection. A propos of which a house is never a house, any more than a body can be "just" that. A model of a house is, then, a model more than that. In this show a model of a house contains a video monitor showing a sequence of images which is also projected elsewhere in the gallery. The two tapes aren't synchronized. To see one of them one must first look into (projectively enter) the house. And what does one see? The camera searching first the ground and then the sky, an out of focus eye peering back from behind an in focus diaphanousness, Jennings as a fairy, mechanical fairies, the house being made, the show being assembled. And what, by the way, are fairy tales? They're the only stories we tell our children without knowing what they mean.

Precious objects, like the Crown Jewels to which some of Jennings' works refer, are things that aren't just things. (I pass over here the enchantment offered by an American making reference to the British Monarch's most crucial insignia in an Australia preoccupied with the monstrous thought that if nothing is done about declaring the place a republic Elizabeth Windsor will be hanging around the next Olympic Games. Perhaps she should be told.) Their preciousness means that they are the objects of a particular kind of regard, and as such the Crown Jewels are perhaps a triadic sign in that they are made out of precious materials like gold and jewels, are works of consummate skill, and (I'm talking myth here) stand for a beloved institution. To the extent that once one has allowed for the (typical) English substitution of the state of God the whole thing recalls Heidegger's discussion of a chalice as a sign of more than its material or its making, raw materials skillfully wrought into the sign of a-- collective in the one instance, singular and alterior in the other, originary in both-- entity which actually lies beyond the object or its making, and which is what it's about, what it puts one in touch with, what it leads towards, what it recalls. Behind a mosquito net float some discs which are themselves made out of thread. They appear to float because they are hanging from thread one can't see. Line becomes surface and the only clearly linear lines are the rigid ones made by the metal rings over which the thread is wound. Circular lines, then, which lead only back on themselves. Everywhere else linearity constitutes fields, and the line which becomes a surface which is also translucent is a line freed from either simple opacity or unidirectionality. Delicacy qualifying delicacy, but by the same token delicacy as a property of that which is at once light and unclear. Nietzsche said that lightness was the first principle of his aesthetic, and the idea of a surface is an idea of weightlessness-- weight being a property of bodies not planes-- but the precious could never be clear. Any clarity shed on the precious could only provoke a search for a further explanation. And one could say that the precious is always present to explanation because it can't be explained away.

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