

Observing the wrong body

On Gemma Anderson's recent work

There is a common longing that is hunted down, pinned in these works – a longing for a time when observation could reflect upon itself as being universal, fresh, absolute. Drawing, in this remote advent of science, had a power that depended on a radical belief in the parallels between the artist and God himself – drawing alone could bring forth what was hidden, illustrate the workings of nature, possess and collect the world. As science was split for effectiveness and rationality, drawing lost its absolutist and spiritual attributes, never to regain its specific aura or its pivotal role in fine arts practice. We have been left without this central cohesion and illuminating tool – and the ways to deal with this range from accepting this vanishing of drawing and look elsewhere, to creating a fable that sustains its use.

Gemma Anderson's work is transparently fabulous – like a good fable, it seems to run through a series of «as ifs»: as if we could start again – observing, possessing the world for the first time; as if what goes on inside still mattered, critically; as if we still expected to meet the absolute stranger – monster, prophet, angel, or someone with a soul; as if drawing could take on the world; as if we could look at the body with Byzantine detachment, refusing form and appearance, using it as a window into a next place.

There is something funereal, final, about using the body as window, transparency, or meeting point to another body – we feel this is forbidden knowledge, intrusive observation, or a potentially harmful gesture. Gemma Anderson plays with this uneasiness by using signs from the subject's life or attributes, or by turning the inner systems into independent geographies or decorative amusements, all purposefully lyrical and inadequate. The sitter is subjected to the portrait, dreadfully still and open; creatures are produced through destructive love and breeding, countering and playing with humanistic purity; the domains of the symbolic and the literal are intentionally superimposed, confused. Accuracy refuses to become instrument.

We are reminded of some verses in a Bertolt Brecht poem - «Observe each one you set eyes upon. / Observe strangers as if they were familiar / And those whom you know as if they were strangers». Strangers for family, and family for strangers – in Gemma Anderson's work, too, we can recognize this procedure. Like in the Brecht poem we have the «as if» as the great tool and the great advice - to be able to compare and to observe, to start a picture that claims the world.

Francisco Lobo, London, 16th of October 2007