

The Exhibitionist



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ISBN: 979-8-9890826-2-9
Sleeping Monkey Press

Arrange whatever pieces come your way. (Virginia Woolf)

The gallery resembles a horse collar. Walkways to the exhibit lead away from the lobby at the left and right, wrap around an inner closed-off core of storerooms, workshops and offices, and join up at the other end of the building.

We are early for the exhibition. We are milling.

Enthusiastically tattooed young people emerge from the core to serve us champagne.

With a childlike assumption of regality, the exhibition artist circulates among us, lonely as a small civet.

From here, I have an anticipatory glimpse of a few of the art pieces, or “stills,” as the artist calls them, arranged on the outer walls of the walkways and blissfully unburdened by notes, titles or explanations. Each is illuminated by a small spotlight.

Art left, darkness right.

We are deer at dusk at the edge of the forest, ready to feed, watchful, eying potential nourishment ahead.



At last, we are invited to enter the lefthand walkway and *proceed in an orderly fashion*—already breaking faith with the quixotic and unpredictable artist whose work we have come to see.

I wonder aloud whether some of us might enter instead at the right, but no.

I am not invited to understand why.

The creations consist of objects donated to charity, lost, or simply thrown out and later chanced upon by the artist who assembled them into small and often mysterious new worlds reminiscent of portraiture, tableaux, or “cinematic” stills.

“Charting the uncanny” was a phrase I read on a placard in the lobby.

The soft spot-lighting of the pieces encourages our intimacy with them. Illumination has such subjective effects!

I do not mean to imply a kind of ideal.

Beauty makes me hopeless. (Anne Carson)



As I proceed, I begin to sense a sort of striving within the pieces, a coiled tension. I cannot put my finger on why I feel that, and what the work is striving for remains a mystery—though a pleasing one.

The objects themselves, out of their original context, appear right and natural and somehow satisfied with themselves.

I suspect they know they are exactly where they were always meant to be.



I wonder silently if the art similarly considers us, in all our assembled variations.

I strike a pose.

Within the small group of us a rhythm begins to develop and soon we are progressing smoothly as though standing on a slow moving conveyor belt.

I see that tiny bulbs have been set into the ceiling of the gallery to approximate the stars of the Northern Hemisphere.

We count for nothing much in this scheme, though it all has been arranged specifically for us.

I begin to hope the reinvigorated objects will greet me when I approach. Maybe tell me a little something.

How bracing it must be to be curated!

I am curious whether the artist created the works by herself. If she was all alone in the room. Alone in the house. In the world.



Occasionally, someone steps out of our little procession and out of the light, as if drawn into an eddy.

The champagne has put me in mind of an evening in Venezia when I found myself eating dinner in a very high-ceilinged room. Art covered the entire surface of each wall, from chair height on up, to marvelous effect. Such alchemy in the vertical!

Our progress here is as through a dim horizontal tube.

And once, not in Venezia, but in a village in the Dolomiti, after an avalanche, I happened upon a small crowd staring at eight people who had been frozen solid—Pompeii-like figures, locked in a moment—and laid out in a row.

I had not expected that.

Every little thing is water. (Gertrude Stein)



I am aware of someone speaking nearby, but resist turning and can only make out ...*nothing accretes to glory*. What a strangely formal phrase!

My hands are in my pockets. Those touching my hair—those are not mine.

I stop in place to let the crowd flow around me until I have a wholly new set of exhibition companions—new noises, new jostlings—*yes, this is better.*

As I consider the art now in front of me, I adopt a stance and attitude that I feel are exhibition-worthy.

Life is movement and pressure and now and then a quick
look—perhaps to a starred ceiling—to plot our position.
Aspiring to grandeur is something else.

Looking up makes me dizzy. I wish I had something to hold
on to. Maybe a stick.

Tonight we are moving clockwise.

When the Coriolis Effect comes for one, it comes for us all.



The mind wanders and begins to work on the declension of objects:

He/she abandons.

She/he is abandoning him/her/it.

I am, he/she/it is abandoned, lost, discarded, left behind.

Save me.

I do not mean to imply identification, either.

As I pass an image of a horse, our eyes meet. I feel it has been expecting me.

It is not really all about me, except that it is.

*I put an apple on the table. Then I put myself into the apple.
How peaceful.* (Henry Michaux)



She is as in a field a silken tent. (Robert Frost)

There is a low hum of commentary right around me. I am not aware of any sound coming from the darkness to our right, though now and again someone disappears into it.

Sadly, I realize I have missed some of the art, carried along as I have been with breathing, compaction, the heavens, the core, my own wayfaring thoughts.

I catch my reflection in the glass of a frame and survey myself
for adjustment.

I think “preen” would be too strong a word.



I glance up again at the starry ceiling to see where I am in the cosmos, but then quickly look down at my feet, afraid of losing balance.

I notice on the floor near me a desiccated worm carried in on someone's shoe—straight, flattened on one end, it looks something like the spear tip of a Praetorian Guard.

Next to it is a piece of something else shaped like an animal, a small creature, perhaps a companion left behind after a fatal skirmish at the Roman court; a guard's minion that must by now recognize that his master is dead, is yet another being not present in the present.

I recalculate, renavigate: *I am in a long dark room with art and stars and crowd noise, and maybe a moth.*

I check my pockets.

Behind me, I hear what sounds like someone falling down (maybe because of the stars). My hearing it is performance, too.

That room in Venezia was so crowded with canvases I cannot remember the wall color.

And the frozen avalanche people were more silent than I thought possible. More quiet than the snow.

How sad. How disturbing. How I want to go back again and look



I sense that a little space has opened up behind me, for slowing, for leaning into, for thinking more about what I have seen this evening.

Once I believe in the possibility of that space, I must believe in everything.



To restore silence is the role of objects. (Samuel Beckett)

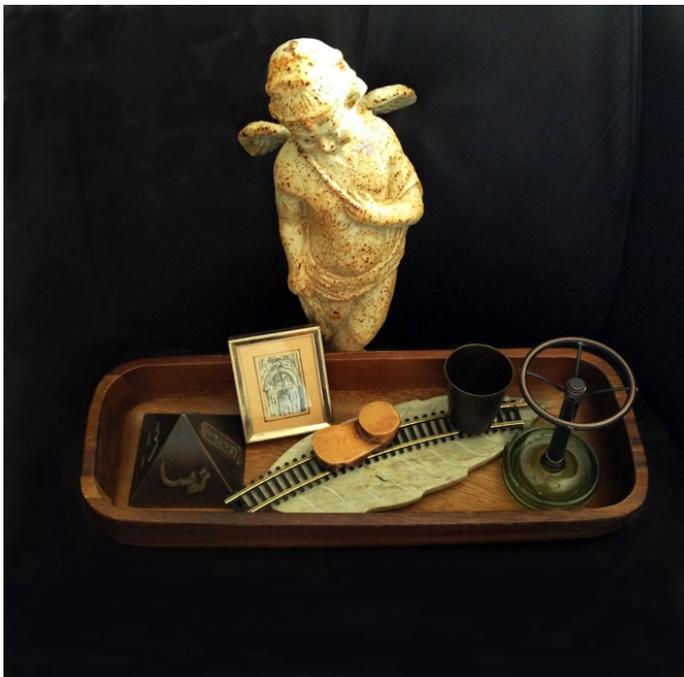
Now I have seen almost everything on display and though some elements of the art seemed familiar, each piece spoke to me—something unexpected passed between us.

I hope I did not frighten the objects.

Thinking about the stills has made me want to keep an eye on castoffs.

Because, sometimes, you know, something ruined just springs up and waves *bello*.

And something may be made of that.



I speculate how long the exhibition will go on, how it will end, whether I will come back.

I do know that soon we will be redeposited in the lobby to begin our seep outward, and we will find ourselves more or less the same as when we entered and feel not the least inkling of failure.

All around us we are outlasted. (John Updike)

