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LANDSCAPES OF DESIRE

PHILIPP BLOM

We are heirs, all of us, unwitting inheritors of vast estates. Through every family, every kind of kin, we receive an endless web of gestures and assumptions shared, of secret languages and familial lore, of hopes passed on and fears transmitted down the generations, of common myths and lies. Not only is this network in us – we ourselves seem little more than the knots in the netting.

Caught in this net is the material part of our inheritances, even the most modest one, the driftwood of wave upon wave of hopes and ambitions, of wear and tear, of dust and mortality: furniture long out of style, letters from people we remember only dimly, ugly cups and saucers of sentimental value, documents relating to businesses long gone, portraits of unknown ancestors or of impostors sneaked into the line, pretenders to family intimacy rightfully reserved for others. This random multiplicity of possible pasts weighs us down, reminding us of inadmissible truths and of half-truths.

Those who lose themselves amid this driftwood are truly lost. The objects forming our inheritance are never mute, constantly murmuring, insinuating and cajoling. But they often speak the language of previous generations, an idiom we no longer understand. Their babbling becomes incomprehensible to us, a kind of inaudible Chinese whispers in which every message coming down to us seems subtly distorted or grotesquely garbled. We cannot uproot them from our imagination, and so their messages

need to be translated or, where that has become impossible, reinvented. We need stories to survive the chaos of experience and of our own treacherous inheritance. We need to imagine an order, a plot, a path through the debris of our kin and our collective pasts – even if it might be true that these imagined orders are nothing but necessary fictions. Retelling and reinterpreting these stories was once the work of priests, whose intention was predicated on interpreting the present in the light of a dim, mythical past. Anything in and of the present was judged by its conformity with Holy Scripture, nothing could be true that was not in complete harmony with the sacred texts, the only plotline that could legitimately map the tangled paths of life.

Then, as the dominion of religion began to wane in the Western world and new ways of storytelling emerged, the artists took over with approaches that were more open and less sure of themselves, less replete with mythical promises and more alive to present experiences. They created a densely layered interplay of reflections between past and present. Relics of antiquity were reinterpreted, mythical subjects became vehicles of aesthetic experimentation, unknown natural objects became foci of fascination and speculation by scholars and poets alike. The stories of the early modern world were driven by a present and a future more important than the past. In our own very material culture, ruled by objects endlessly multiplied by machines and by personal

rituals documented and repeated countless times with minimal variations (snapshots of happy families, holiday photos of always the same monuments with seemingly identical tourist swarms obscuring them), the impulse of retelling one's own past must invent new strategies of appropriation to avoid being choked, discouraged and overwhelmed. The tension between intimacy and anonymity in an industrial world has become too great, our inheritance belongs to different worlds, horizons, languages, rendering the voices of the past incomprehensible or unreliable. Seeking to interpret our inheritance we must find that the evidence itself has become suspect, allowing endless interpretations and endorsing none.

Other, more personal strategies are called for to save us from being overwhelmed. One of these is building a collection that imposes its own order on objects, its own classification and storied hierarchy. A new museum is opened almost every day, containing endless stores of treasure and of clutter not listed in any catalogue, quietly defying the intention of classifying and ordering the material world. These immense hoards, however, can be deadening reminders of an inescapable past, a crushing weight. Another, more daring collecting strategy understands the flood of objects not as an exhortation to comprehensiveness (a doomed endeavour), but as a wasteland from which only individual pieces or small ensembles can be rescued and made to speak.



The relationship of a collector to the objects contained in his or her collection is essentially animist. Nothing is dead. Everything has its voice, its timbre, its personality, and by being admitted into the collection the object changes its nature. If, formerly, it had its definite place in someone's life, it has now been transformed in an object defined not by its usefulness or price, but by its symbolic value. Like a holy relic, which used to be a nail or a piece of cloth or somebody's hand but has now become a catalyst for religious intercession, a key to the realm of the noumenal, an object in a collection has also changed its nature. Lifted out of its original context, it has become something different and begins to answer different questions, to tell new stories.

Two series of works by Michael Huey unite the twin impulses of storytelling and collecting. Serenely beautiful but always quietly insistent, they keep asking questions of objects, both inherited and found. The works meticulously take stock of evidence which has become questionable – not because it might be false, but because its meaning is unstable, the rules of interpretation have shifted or been dissolved.

Huey has made this subtle interrogation of objects into a center of his work. In *Address Book*, he uses a leather-bound volume formerly belonging to his great-grandmother. When it came into the artist's hands, all names and addresses had been erased or crossed out (depending on whether they were written in pencil or ink); the book had become a record of accessions and de-accessions, a potential palimpsest awaiting new inscriptions never imagined by its original owner, a wry meditation on friendship, property, and vanity, and a world of people invalidated by the stroke of a pen as well as an abstract object in its own right.

The series *Houseguests* employs this tactic by contrasting the found interiors of a socially-ambitious, if unremarkably suburban, 1950s bachelor's pad in Tulsa, Oklahoma with their aesthetic inspiration. Suddenly, the tense exchanges between intimate interiors, class aspirations, and a distant, European past that has become little more than a repository of props come into focus. A snapshot of another family home from the same period is as unremarkable and as depressingly drab as all random photos of living rooms – until transformed by extreme enlargement and placed in an early nineteenth-

century room. Here the industrial imitation of aristocratic grandeur lives uneasily with its historic counterpart, opening new possibilities of seeing, of intuiting the space between apparent individuality and the reality of living in a rationalized world of mass production. An act of transubstantiation has taken place, and it rewards repeated viewing, its effect deepening with every time, as the artist's view, at once affectionate and pitiless, reveals the unwitting homage to another time paid by post-war America.

Another group of pictures, the series *China Cupboard*, looks at a succession of everyday storage spaces for ceramics, transforming them into portraits of their owners, theatres of memory, little landscapes of desire. The inversion of colors forces the viewer to look anew at seemingly familiar objects, mute assemblies of heirlooms, everyday pieces and precious porcelain, and suddenly the unintentional juxtapositions begin their own polyphonic murmur. China cupboards have a practical purpose, but they are also silent repositories of aspirations and aesthetics, of beauty, status, propriety. Quintessentially domestic and bourgeois, they contain the material for dinner parties at which friendships are forged and



maintained, marriages founded, clandestine affairs initiated, enmities furthered, estrangements cemented.

Nothing speaks more of social ambition than a cupboard filled with the 'good China' brought out for feasts and high holidays, nothing denotes more fear of chaos, and more satisfaction, than the regimented order of things which can be achieved only on these shelves. The silent assemblies of putti, Chinese dogs, ceramic birds, candlesticks, fragile horsemen, and chipped shepherdesses have the animated intricacy of dolls' houses or miniature stage sets and stand in stark contrast to regimented rows of glasses, piles of plates, and miniature towers of Pisa, built of bowls dangerously leaning this way or that, exercises in the beauty of repetitive forms.

The shelves give multiple horizons to these landscapes. They remind of medieval altarpieces in which a sequence of events – Christ's martyrdom and resurrection – is shown simultaneously, in one snaking narrative, or of the streets of Naples, where in popular altars the crucifixion is played out in a tiered display, divided into a flaming hell at the bottom, complete with damned souls and tiny red light bulbs, an earthly Golgotha, and a vision of Heaven in the uppermost corner. The *China Cupboards*, one understands, are storyboards of aesthetic biography, little altars to their owners' vision of themselves and their place

in the world. The personal becomes archetypical. Through a process of aesthetic alienation very like the transformation of a piece in a collection, Huey's interior landscapes allow the viewer to see anew objects and constellations otherwise too familiar to be seen at all. Erasures and accidents are not incidental to an object's history, they become keys to new possibilities of meaning. As works of art, the objects elicit a primary aesthetic response as well as questions about possible interpretations and layers of meaning. Their presence as things of beauty and their history as objects carrying in themselves intimate significance and associations begin to open up resonances and reach deep into the personal histories of viewer, artist, and former owner. Lifted out of the context of a material heritage too vast and puzzling to allow identification, the individual and subtly estranged objects become departure points for personal storylines – an inheritance reclaimed.

Philipp Blom, Vienna, November 2010

Page 14 left
Scrapbook 2009
 Based on a 1920s scrapbook
 belonging to Dorothy Huey Hull
 C-print on aluminum
 40 × 60 cm, edition of five

Page 14 right
 Still image from *1819*
 Video based on vintage film footage
 from ca. 1930 by Richard K. Huey