

Life in the Now

[Skyscapes. Exhibition by Robbin Deyo at the Centre d'Exposition Expression in Saint Hyacinthe, from July 15th to August 20th 2006]

"The reality of this material comes across as more disturbing: because it possesses a viscosity, a kind of activity or intrinsic power, which is the power of metamorphosis, of polymorphism, and of insensitivity to contradiction (notably the abstract contradiction between form and formlessness)."

Georges Didi-Huberman. In « Pieces of wax ».

Passages and alternations: unpredictable chronicles of light

July 31 11:30. Seen through small window panes, the sky appears cloaked and heavy, with no immediate prospect of clearing – who can predict exactly when the wind might come up? *April 18 20.00.* Clouds are massing, but now begin to break up: the weather is changing. Comprised of 48 panels covered in wax and hung at regular intervals, forming rectangular and rectilinear groups, these recent works by Robbin Deyo, as their titles indicate, call themselves representations of precise atmospheric conditions. Since the poetically sunny *Skyscape 1*, comprised of 240 panels realized while she was in residence at the Banff Centre in 2003-2004, the wind has risen and pushed the clouds towards the window of the artist from British Columbia: and this investigation into the representation of sky light -- which our jaded gaze often fails to appreciate -- has grown more nuanced.

Marked by the unpredictable dynamics of atmospheric disturbance, these "celestial accidents" refute the stability of the present moment. Their formal descriptions, however, add substance to this inquiry into the passage of time, without ever arriving at constancy or permanence. Contemplating these skies, our gaze loses itself first of all in the majestic character of the activities and the subtle singularity of each of the elements composing them. Despite the repetition of this motif, mimetic of the redundancy of our daily life, the sensitive spectator will notice variations of tone and the depth of field in these sky fragments, which change timidly from one moment to the next; as the light crosses the different layers of cloud with the asymmetric beauty characteristic of nature. As a result, incarnated by the legendary rapport drawn here between the base and the form of *Skyscapes*, this dialectic carries a representational paradox: what is more, Deyo structures the spontaneous and the instinctive by using "a material which would have no notion of the contradiction of material qualities," in the words of art historian Georges Didi-Huberman.

By using wax to represent the universal quotidian, and render one of the most banal and common aspects of our lives, the artist insists on the constant transformation of the parameters of phenomenological experience, similar to the intrinsic qualities on which the painstaking and sudden manipulations of this material are based. As Didi-Huberman mentions in "*Pieces of Wax*" (conference given during the colloquium on Arts and Philosophy at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art in 1997), this medium has no "initial" state and can go from a solid to liquid consistency with extreme ease, while it can also be sculpted, modeled or poured. Thanks to this malleability contradicting any passive or fixed form, wax is endowed with life and considered a material of "true forms" by Pliny the Elder. From

ancient funerary masks to the statues of the Guerlain Museum that are truer than nature, up to and including the “perishable” displays placed in restaurant windows to tempt passersby, wax is used to expose life, even as it unconditionally reminds us of its precariousness and finality – in both medium and subject.

In this sense, the paradigm of wax described by Didi-Huberman finds a particular resonance in Skyscapes. Contradicting the symmetric character of their material disposition and their scientific subject (the dates serving as titles for the most recent elements in the series evoke the idea of a project to catalogue weather conditions), empirically they generate unpredictable reports of light. Due to their delicate construction, minimal and anonymous, which subtly bring to life suspected invisible dynamics, they invite us to grab the wind with the purest optimism, and personally thwart the alienation which conditions daily life in the modern world. The panels play on their own singularity to transcend the hermeticism of the grid on which they are positioned, rerouting categories of modernist painting as they dialogue with one another.

Mnemonic Kitchen

In the starry sky entitled *Sweet Dreams* (1998), reproduced on the cover of this issue, the artist has cleverly inserted pastel-coloured stars, e.g. blue, yellow and orange, into the wax background. Pouring wax into the cookie cutter molds cast in the form our popular culture gives to stars – a gesture linked to her memories of the baked goods she used to make with her grandmother –, Deyo achieves resolutely *kitsch* residues which have a definite delicious element. Putting aside the idea of making a plausible representation of a starry night, the artist appropriates the practice of cooking so that her forms become traces of her own intimate memories, and are invested with greedy desire and also with the feminine. She literally concocts sugary dreams, like our female ancestors who for ages possessed exclusive, personal responsibility for feeding their family (as noted by Luce Giard in her investigations entitled “Cooking”, published in the second volume of *The Invention of the Quotidian* by Michel de Certeau).

Deyo does not trade in the mythology of women’s work in general, but rather the way in which they – like “ordinary people” as a group – approach and reinvent daily life, both for themselves and their entourage. In the first place, the aforementioned cookie cutters permit her to dismantle the monotony of domestic life (the artist’s web site is exhaustive on the subject of these earlier series: see www.bluerobbin.com). In the 1997 series *Sweetness and Light* for example, these pieces of wax, which resemble fancy cookies, become magnets and are stuck to a refrigerator door and onto large metal panels. Then, in *Samples* and *Wallflowers*, the same instruments are used to remove and insert elements to the wax layer that she has poured onto the panel surfaces. Abandoning the food forms, for *Fresh Cut Flowers* the artist nevertheless resumes this same “art of making” to create mosaics and lace in more subtle tones, whose finesse and elegance clearly bring to mind tablecloths and sheets, as well as details of oriental architecture. Owing to the ultra-simple beauty which Deyo has invested in these works, wax embodies the lyrical traces of life.

Poetics of immediate life

The placing of *Forget Me Not*, with its 8,000 flowers, directly on the wall, borrows from the calculated format of *Skyscapes* and the molding technique of *Sweet Dreams*. Therefore it is no accident that this work, first shown in 1999-2000, shares the same room as *Skyscape 1* at the gallery Expression: while on one side (of the gallery) the resplendent sky is set a certain height from the ground, (on the other) the field of flowers lies closer to ground level and is installed according to a more repetitive layout than it was when initially exhibited. In a relationship of tension inspired by the contradictory and ever-immediate power of wax, nature takes on appearances which at times are almost photographic, at times visually joyous. The juxtaposition of these two large formats (each approximately ten metres wide) makes us feel that, hard as we try to change life by fashioning it as a whole, it can easily and immediately be transformed through giving more importance to each of the details of the every day. Through being aware of the particularities of the real, Deyo demonstrates that she knows how to conjugate the power of wax with life in the Now.

Laurent Vernet

translation by Ann Diamond