



MOUSSE



Beth Collar, *Dad with a tummy upset*, 2017, *Plural melts - Household Values* installation view at Yvonne Lambert, Berlin, 2017 Courtesy: the artist and Yvonne Lambert, Berlin. Photo: Philippe Gerlach

Sabrina Tarasoff | 01 February 2021

A Heart Perpetually Awake: Beth Collar

“Alas, the heart is not a metaphor—or not only a metaphor.”
—Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*, 2001



In the midst of the autumn's strange syncopation, an internal rhythm split between pure waiting and errant expectations, I descend into a somnambulant state, near stasis. Life shimmers at a distance as though I had caught it from what Anne Carson once called "the sleep side": drifting, hidden, unknown. I descend into the dream to see what crosses over. Blind sleep stares back at me in the winter pale of a foreign city. It is a library of sighs and tears, silent smiles, screams, someone's respiration. Semaphores pointing to some inexorably approaching disaster, or just an anxiety dream. I fall through fugue states and fantasies like a wet snowflake. Intersections are animated in the underground hum of quiet commuters. A gossamer light refracts a distracted inner space from between two discordant towers. Apple adds the anatomical heart to the catalog of emoji, as if to acknowledge Elizabeth Hardwick's sleepless lines: *the heart is not a metaphor—or not only*. Night plunges in, exposing the contrafactions of broad daylight. I dream of libraries filled with clay pigeons; the books are all dead. (Language skips, flutters, out of breath; I follow its *lines of flight*.)

I court instances where the signified heart is tried for meaning, as T. J. Clark would whisper—instances in which "the present ecstasy of the virtual and non-verbal is put to the test of *form*." Think to the Tin Man's daisy-chained moral compass as it ticks toward love. Robert Gober's radioactive cardiac muscle as it glows from the gutters of the Fondazione Prada's Haunted House. A cartoon heart placed into the corolla of a garden Marguerite for safekeeping in Pierre Sala's *Petit Livre d'Amour* (ca. 1500). I chase the torrents of my nocturnal mind by pressing an ear against the stagnant brag of the prefab heart's fixed idiolect. An image steeped in the conditional. It quops for—what, exactly? Perhaps (a marvel from the mouth of Beth Collar, whom I caught on the phone from Rome):

"That thing coming—"

Which is? Not imminence as such, but expectant emotions and their sometimes-errant movements. Anticipation of what has already arrived. Disasters that do not await us because they have by definition escaped the possibility of experience (at least "escaped on the wings of adjectives," like words fleeing Hardwick's mind into insomnolent epistles written in the perpetual twilight of grief and posthumousness). Like catching glimpses of the incognito (the "I" or "other" seen from an odd angle) in the shadows of a bad dream. Something caught asleep, like unsuspecting Ariadne. Her slumber signifies the disaster of her fate; in her image we see the catastrophe that awaits upon her waking. It is what Maurice Blanchot forges as "this silent passive, this dead eternity": a temporal form given to what nothing ("neither knowledge or un-knowledge," he admonishes) can adequately designate. Blanchot fumbles in the darkness of disaster to understand how we might inhabit what threatens infinitely; he invokes a question regarding what can possibly be drawn from the unmentionable. Slipping through these fragments, I think to "that thing coming," a grave weight seen for example in the suffocating speechlessness of snow-choked nimbostratus in Vija Celmins's drawings, or the sleeping beauties lost and left voiceless in a midair alpine limbo in Giovanni Segantini's *Il castigo delle lussuriose* (The Punishment of Lust, 1891). Depictions of things that sleep without the slightest movement until a catastrophe precipitates or recedes. Elsewhere, as in Collar's own oeuvre of skullcaps and heels and heads sunken into baseboards—that is, seen dipping beneath the pale of consciousness—are encounters with what threatens (the self, the ideal) etched into the breathless expressions of the petrified. Like the pierced heart and hysteric hurt of Niccolò dell'Arca's Magdalene in the *Compianto sul Cristo morto* (Lamentation Over the Dead Christ,



1463–90), or Robert Gober’s hole-y saints, pour of tears and broken stone. Or death pronounced in the countenance of a sprinting man, suspended in motion, in Nicolas Poussin’s *Paysage avec un homme tué par un serpent* (Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake, 1648). From Poussin’s letters, an *essai* at designation:

“*Moy qui fais profession des choses muettes*”
(I, who make a profession of mute things)

Like so, Collar’s work converses with tongue-tied things, trying to untwist. *That thing coming*, those *choses muettes*, is an address to the glittering voicelessness of a sleepless night—in other words, a discourse among the restless, as articulated by Blanchot’s night-mind: “Not the work of arguments bumping against other arguments, but the extreme shuddering of no thoughts, percussive stillness.” Like the lithographic coccyx, emaciated rib cage, hand holding knotted bark, and love writ into the skin of a conifer in Collar’s 2020 exhibition “*End Quote*” (all works made in 2020) at stadium in Berlin. Drawn forth from places of muteness, barely emergent from the sonorous dark, is an iconography forged in the clouds of prolepsis.

These are images of anticipation. Cathedrals of bones and tumescent mallets courting what the catastrophizing mind craves to pry apart: the body’s shyest territories, contorted forms and colorless bones, twisted positions and contoured hearts, that have come to stand in for some speechless sentiment. Grief, maybe. The so-called lost object and its sleepy reticence. Something Ludwig Wittgenstein would speak to in a language of signs. But above all, like a medieval bard dazzled by a castle’s *ouvraiges ingénieux*, Collar’s muteness calls from deep within the mind’s dream-woods. She continues the anxious sleeper’s work of finding verisimilarities to an unapproachable *idée fixe*: not the event of the disaster, not “merely” what is consequently lost. Certainly, not the loss as such, but what is recuperated in the mind a priori. That is, what for present purposes I will call *Love*: an experience animated in the states of anticipation and delay, recursions and suspensions of the charged heart’s quotidian catastrophes. (“It really goes,” Sylvia Plath writes, astonished.) Collar’s mute things—the disembodied bones, frightened limewood faces caked with makeup, thorn-tacked drawings channeling teen spirit (a collaborative dream drafted with Eoghan Ryan), cut-off arms, Crusaders, and cloaked men—are represented as stuck in states of (be)coming, as if caught up in the breath before it all breaks down. Her artistic qualms are those of the bad sleeper. Cue Haytham El Wardany:

“Catastrophe is the point at which the whole nature of the conflict changes and becomes a conflict of another kind, one which requires another kind of resistance. In this sense, catastrophe is not an extension of the conflict but the instant of its radical transformation, in which it loses all connection to what came before. [. . .] Freighted with brokenness and surrender, [sleep is] the shadow of catastrophe, its doppelgänger, without which it cannot recede.

To mitigate the psychic impact of all manners of impending doom, like anticipating a loved one’s death or being crushed by the canon, Collar’s work ciphers what the mind cannot possibly hold. She is doing dreamwork for those of us with calamitous dispositions. Her objects are culled from the manifest calm of millpond dreams; their essence is the unmentionable. Go in the direction of these dreams, and lurking, like Martin Sheen in the rivers of *Apocalypse Now*



(1979), you will find involutions of the self. Figures fragmented in the torment of personal relation, asymmetries of affection, blown-up, hysterical “female” emotions, the unstable shimmers of the mind, death, heartbreak, stomachaches, apathy, awkward silence, sudden frailty. Bodies barely there, speechless. Misshapen selves are bound by a poetic restraint, a kind of meter; in her words: “Pressing through the holes perforating the tail bone, [. . .] the light hits the flat irises under huge glazed bubbles of ice, pinholes in the center of seething red discs, [. . .] a sliver of pink-whip tongue [. . .] mist encircling the hamlet [. . .] mistletoe, sand and sawdust soaking up blood, tarmac, mistletoe [. . .] the vents, the veil, my first kiss.” [Beth Collar, *End Quote* press release]

Paramount in these lines is Collar’s use of asyndeton, that relentless conjunction of *things coming*, as a nod not only to the dark theater of respiration, one breath after another as signified by a set of protruding lungs in bony frame, but also to whatever is caught in the delicate fan of the rib cage’s caesura. A *rêlache* of the breath, the inexorable abandon of being. The building of a world is countered in the drawings by an equally meticulous closure. Bodies snap shut like seashells. Extremities stretch into spindly threads, as easy to snap as a lifeline. Figures are mirrored by the architectural structures they are set against. Where the signifiers of a specific self are absent, these creatures find meaning—or subjectivity—in an asyndetic order. Cue Collar’s closing salvo:

“Endless, great, endless, on the scale of one to ten, sometimes, I feel, very sad.”

Listen closely, too, to Collar’s refrain, the repetition of “mistletoe,” and “endless.” Though as images these are absent from the drawings (how to represent the “endless,” anyway?), the double mistletoes are two kisses interspersed in the verse to amp up the mechanical brag at the heart of her work. Collar’s repetition of words concerns the often masochistic machinations of the mind, its “disavowal, suspense, waiting, fetishism and fantasy. Not the doubling per se, not merely the reprise, but the contorted motions and rhythmic melancholy that make up the specific constellations of her subjects and motifs. In “*End Quote*,” as well as elsewhere in her oeuvre, scenes of solitary cruelty (or some downward spiral) transpose the real into romantic fantasy by alluding to *that thing coming*—the disaster, the thing denied, mortal silence, the dead bell, the hell inside your head. Collar’s work is filled with such anxiety dreams, dissociative states, doubles, mirages, marvels, miracles—of the medieval sort—and figments of the imagination, its false cognates. Measured against the canon’s dead weight, her scopic impulse courts sights of grim Death, or at least its anaphoric approximations in art; let’s call them skins, masks, mirrors, monsters, living machines. As Carson writes in her ode to the sleep side, “It is the emptiness of things before we make use of them, a glimpse of reality prior to its efficacy.”

Perhaps:

*“Et les merveilles, les deduis,
Les ars, les engins, les conduis,
Les esbas, les estranges choses”*

(The marvels, the delights
The artifices, the mechanical devices, the piped-in water



The diversions, the strange attractions)

In Guillaume de Machaut's poem *Rémede de fortune* (Remedy of Fortune, ca. 1341), the self-contained loops of marvels, artifices, amusements, and living machines call for a poetics of restraint that mirrors the bondage of bodies in Collar's oeuvre. The *Rémede* commences in the lovelorn strains of a medieval trouvère, acknowledging the inexorable compulsion to sing—qua "I have to sing this because . . ."—as a symptom of love's soporific sickness. He strolls across pastures and vales, seeking solitude from his sullen state while droning lamentations on love in a strophic form that stretches as far as the landscape he is lost in. His monophonic complaint turns its proto-sludge melody around and around a single line for thirty-six or so full stanzas before the poet finally finds himself in the gardens of the Castle of Hesdin in northern France. Fortune has failed the mooning lover. He is alone with his dead march and its already-démodé lyric form. But amid the rote mechanics and self-enclosed motions of the castle's "engines of entertainment," our Prince Charming of the sad ballad begins to feel his misery not only modeled but mediated by the elaborate shocks and special effects of this fourteenth-century fantasyland. "Within these shocks," as Norman M. Klein writes on technological marvels, "an allegory emerges.

Which is what? Love is a cruel trick that sets off states of anxious anticipation in slow motion; the poem a machine of amusement imagineered with the dark ride of courtly romance in mind. In the strange thrills of mirror mazes and distorting lenses, statues that shift position, automata bound to singular gestures of violence (sadistic, if you can call machines that), and various tableaux vivants, the poem's bound intimacy, closed corners, refrains, and fixed images find apposite form. Collar's sculptures and performances mirror the rhythmic emptiness of the poem's stilled images. I am thinking about the furrow-browed alien heads that floated in the floorboards of Standpoint, London, in Collar's exhibition *Seriously* (2017), all stalled in states of ominous emergence. Or the flights of feet and flora in *Daddy Issues* at Dilston Grove, London (2019), in which, as the exhibition's text read, "parasitic plant life and human tissue [are] connected through dream logic. Skin and cloth become indivisible—rendered anatomically alike, connected or fused."

Her skullcaps and pointed toes, dissected trees, tailbones, and alien brows are caught between the anxiety of an arrival and the relief of implied momentum. The weight of the sculptural canon is countered by the featherweight mien of objects about to sprout or sprint. Kicking heels are paralyzed with the amazing fact of love. A tree stays tree, trapped with life. Time feels plastic, as Collar writes. But I suspect she means for us to read into "plastic time" the times we *feel* plastic: malleable, pliant, spinning thoughts of our own artifice.

In the presence of Collar's mute things, I fall asleep into the static of dreams and awake expecting chaos. In them, the potential of something catastrophic is unveiled in slow motion. A last image flashes to mind. Set the stage to an evening in a gallery. A tacit group crowds Collar. She is ambling in a circle with binoculars in hand. Looking into the near-far of her heart, perhaps. Or looking for proof of the heart, beyond metaphor. A laptop lies open on the ground to a series of auto-reply emails. She trips over a glass of volcanic-looking wine. It spills to the ground in a rush of deep red. Against a window is a sleeping figure: a miniature of her father. She calls to him through her magnifying lenses: *Dad?* The sleeping sculpture shuts out the world. Her audience stares, maybe speculates on the frail serenity of the figure. When I ask



about *Dad with an upset tummy* (2017) over the phone, Collar talks to me about the realization of her father's physicality. In a foreign city, both of them sick, she is forced to consider—what? “That thing coming,” the concordance of what's to come. The presentience of a heart perpetually awake.

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