



'In Praise of Aspiration' Nicholas Cullinan

Aspiration is the art world's dirty secret. The thing that none of us, no matter how much we may want, wish in the slightest to admit to. A desire that dare not drop its name, so to speak. Milly Thompson's first foray into a solo career after almost ten years spent working with the art collective BANK marked a delayed entrée into the category of 'emerging artist' and promptly turned this embarrassment about desire into a rich vein of subject matter. Aware that vaulting ambition is usually the province of youth and can soon curdle into desperation on anyone past their first flush, Thompson has fashioned a practice that is often uncomfortably honest about its tentative aspirations and wry dreams of success and glamour. For anyone familiar with Thompson's work over the last few years, or her prior involvement with the group BANK, the present exhibition 'Savoir Faire' is likely to startle and perplex as much as it might be seen to develop and elaborate on some of the themes that have appeared in her projects before. Wary of using a retrospective glance to the past in order to offer some clues with which to elucidate the present (something that Thompson is probably also keen to avoid) nonetheless, a brief look backwards might help to flesh out some of the work included in the present exhibition.

The publication *Opera* that accompanied Thompson's solo exhibition 'Late Entry' at Peer, London in 2007, in particular offers an array of clues and insights into her often deliberately opaque work. Thompson's publication took the form of a semi-fictitious interview, which reminisced over her past involvement with BANK, and even continued their strategy of pre-empting criticism. Subtitled 'A conversation with the artist including some highs and some lows', the text work interspersed such self-conscious melodrama amongst the conversation by dividing it into theatrical acts, given appropriately grandiloquent Italianate titles such as 'Atto Uno, Due, and Tre', and replete with a self-dramatising 'Overture', and 'Arias'. Set in the midst of this theatrical framework, Thompson began by narrating her

history in a seemingly straightforward, anecdotal fashion, from the banal, 'we didn't have any money,' to the euphoric and hyperbolic, 'there was sex, drinking, drugs, theatricality and of course hoards of admiring acolytes.' But interspersed with her own recollections, some of which were so confessional as to be almost confrontational, and scattered throughout the text, were quotations and snippets lifted from other artists as disparate as Wyndham Lewis and Jeff Koons. These echoes of other voices and alter-egos function as a chorus that somehow aligns itself with Thompson's overarching concerns, but also produces a creeping feeling of dissonance about who is actually speaking and who might have nothing to say, in a way which tacitly addressed Thompson's then anxieties over creative and career frustrations. What might this interview, with its alternately feigned and flaunted sincerity and blurring of narrative and intentions, tell us about the rest of the artist's *modus operandi*? Thompson's first solo exhibition after leaving BANK took place in an appropriately offbeat setting — a deconsecrated and dilapidated baroque chapel in Rome, which had been taken over to stage a series of exhibitions. *Voglio soldi di più solo quando c'è gente ricca intorno (I only want money more when there are rich people around)*, consisted of an outsize diamond necklace made of card, draped ostentatiously over the high altar of the church. Projected onto this were videos of supposed diamonds in grainy black and white, which were obviously from cut glass, underscoring the gulf between intense ambitions and the rather pathetic means available. An accompanying soundtrack of blaring heavy-metal rendered the usual polite chitchat at such an occasion impossible. While the project was largely a manifestation of Thompson's self-effacing preoccupations at the time (a desire for success and all that accompanies it, whilst struggling simultaneously with the anxiety that such lofty ambitions produce in the fear of failing to achieve them) the work was also pitched fair and square at its audience; an arty assortment of part-bohemian, part-bourgeois Romans. As we shall see, Thompson's tactic of applying faint praise to her milieu is one that would develop in the ensuing work.

Thompson's earlier works included in the exhibition at Peer last year charted the years after BANK, where she made struggling

with being on her own, finding a new direction and voice, and even the mundane task of actually trying to *make work*, the very subject of her nascent solo career. A photograph from 2005 — *La danse de l'amour et de la haine de soi (The dance of self-love and self-hate)* shows Thompson in her studio, shrouded in a blanket and slumped over her desk. Artfully assembled around her are all the usual dishevelled accoutrements of an artist's studio that one would expect — an empty wine glass, and various source images and works in progress tacked up on the studio wall. How are we to read such a conspicuous withdrawal from the viewer's scrutiny? A video included in the exhibition would seem to act as a counterpart to such a carefully rehearsed confessional. In *Basking in the melodrama of my own self-consciousness*, a well-off and well-dressed middle-age woman sits alone in a café in Barcelona, struggling to maintain an impressive façade of nonchalance at being — or, perhaps worse — at being *left* alone. Soundtracked by the cloying lyrics of Flávia Müller Medeiros singing the co-dependent anthem *Wild Is The Wind* ('love me, love me, say you do, let me fly away with you...') accompanied by an appropriately ersatz North African guitar, we begin to speculate further on this woman's predicament, wondering if perhaps her evident anxiety extends beyond just being left alone at a café and into an anxious assessment of her impending old age spent in isolation. Intercut with this are images of expensive handcrafted pottery and films of expressive dancers such as Loie Fuller, which offsets and places in a harsh light, the self-censorship of the older woman, all edited with the clunky software of iMovie and therefore lending a rather shambolic gloss on these remnants of a glamorous and unobtainable international avant-garde.

This theme continues in a series of drawings called *The Dinner Party* from 2004, of figures drawn from Woody Allen's 1978 film *Interiors*. Each one is presented singly, isolated from the company they keep and their environment, a perfect echo of the clinical dissections of the mores of the middle classes in the film from which they derive. The final group of works in the Peer show act as a bridge to the more determinedly optimistic works of the present exhibition. *Energy Block (a curator's friend)*, comprises brightly coloured blocks of balsa wood, the work's

fashionable nod to Modernist geometric constructions and their ingratiating subtitle, seem to suggest that Thompson has revised her tactics and is ready to embrace success.

Fast-forward a year, and the centrepiece of the current exhibition 'Savoir Faire' is a city of plinths, painted in colours evoking a Benetton-ad array of flesh tones, ranging from pasty pink to dusky brown. Atop some of these are works referred to as *Anxiety Knots* — amorphous soft-shaped sculptures made from stuffed tubular forms covered in exotic and expensive fabrics, including sari and kimono silks, that echo the rainbow assortment of skin-coloured plinths they dangle from. The twist comes in the blobby substances that engulf their extremities, resembling bodily fluids such as snot and excrement, while their flaccid forms that loll over the edges of the plinths, point to the soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg.

Class and Sex

'He gave her class and she gave him sex appeal.' So goes the famous summary of the *quid pro quo* transaction between Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers, with all their magic, chemistry and fancily choreographed footwork reduced to a well-balanced equation. A similar trade-off and mutually beneficial association can be seen playing out in another body of work by Thompson known as *Dumb, hard*, comprised of pages lifted straight from *W* magazine, pasted onto the flesh coloured plinths or slathered onto gold lame covered supports. Interspersed amongst the ads for luxury goods, designer clothes and jewels, in a manner that implies their equivalence, are artists projects for the publication by, amongst others, John Baldessari, Matthew Barney and Richard Prince and articles on Joan Jonas and Martha Rosler. Who might be seen to emerge victorious in an art-commerce frottage such as that unfolding across the glossy pages of *W*? Is it:

a) Tom Ford (continuing to posture in polysexual poses with the aid of starlets such as Scarlett Johansson and Kiera Knightly

playing the supporting roles of 'Celebrity Beard') rubbing up against heavyweights such as Martha Rosler?

Or:

b) Might Richard Prince gain more agency through proximity to the very celebrity muses who have inspired his own work, now, no longer acolyte, but upgraded to equal?

Ocean Spray

Now and again the spray broke on the deck, splashing her hands, soaking her gown, but she did not care... she sat crossed-legged like a gypsy, her shawl tucked into her sash, and the wind playing havoc with her hair.

Daphne du Maurier, *Frenchman's Creek*

Thompson's film *Aroma Venus* (named after a dessert of questionable taste, in multivalent meanings of the phrase, in a Chinese restaurant) takes this strategy of subversive selections, juxtaposed at random with no judgement or commentary by their author, even further, by conflating snippets from Daphne du Maurier's *Frenchman's Creek* of 1941, with extracts from Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* of 1966. The first, set during the Restoration, follows its heroine Dona St Columb, as she makes the classic dating error of choosing as her desiderata a commitment-phobic 'French philosopher-pirate'; a gentleman caller who also happens to be, in addition to his multi-tasking job title, 'the terror of the Cornish coast.' The prose of the novel might best be matched to the colour 'purple' on the chromatic spectrum, and contains metaphors and pathetic fallacies that almost audibly groan under their heavy freight of sexual implications. ('Then out of the sea, like a ball of fire, the sun came, hard and red.') The second is a mirror image of the exoticism implied by du Maurier's tale, as Rhys imagines the back-story for the cipher-like character of Mrs. Rochester, the mad woman hidden in the attic from Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre* of 1847. In Rhys' imaginative recasting, before being banished

to the attic of Thornfield Hall, Antoinette Cosway was a Creole heiress, a 'product of an inbred, decadent, expatriate community; a sensitive girl at once beguiled and repelled by the lush Jamaican landscape.' In Rhys' feminist classic, it is the Yorkshire moors and the thwarted desire that plays out amongst them, that become the exotic and forbidden 'other'. Curiously, both books are the same length, have the same narrative rhythm, and contain the idea of women made masculine. Drawn from these two tales of romance and exoticism, Thompson constructs an overlapping narrative from fragments of dialogue with six narrative voices — three for each story — including the authors (du Maurier and Rhys); and a pair of lovers for each novel (Dona St Columb and the Frenchman, Antoinette Cosway and Mr. Rochester). These are intertwined and read by appropriate voices — a breathless female, and a suitable male tenor — set against a clichéd, but authentic, recording of the waves lapping on a Caribbean beach, the rhythmic interjections and quite literal aspirations of breathy sighs. Accompanying this performance of *écriture féminine* is something that ups the ante on 'strange'. A series of photographic images, drawn from 'specialist' art photography magazines and lifestyle guides, such as India Hick's guide to living beautifully and looking pretty on exotic beaches with nature relegated to a type of insanely high-end accessory (a book which was, in an almost perfect metaphor for Thompson's entire practice, procured from the remaindered bin of a bookshop), shows an array of anthropomorphic images drawn from nature, including trees with crevices doubling for orifices, and disconcertingly fleshy tropical fruits such as mangoes, engorged with juice and with greedy fingers shoved in the pulp. These are juxtaposed with human models shown with an outlandish array of 'exotic' accoutrements, with, for example, a squid standing in for the more conventional fig leaf, to cover-up not the model's modesty, but the viewer's, and camouflage the otherwise straightforward, bog-standard soft-porn nature of these images, in a whole new genre that might best be described by a compound term such as 'ethnoporn' or 'anthroporn' (take your pick). The cumulative effect of such an array of naked black models, and images of Barbados, is, as Thompson has observed, 'guiltily sexualised.'

Dumb, hard

From images of forbidden fruit from Barbados to a fictitious campaign to save a British local library — what could possibly link two such seeming non-sequiturs? Southend-on-Sea Central Library is a small gem amongst the admittedly specialist category of provincial English Brutalist architecture, circa 1970, or, more specifically, as Thompson puts forward in her poster, a pearl before swine. 'Should everything look the same, feel the same, be the same — vote for originality and for the unique,' demands the crankily emphatic tag-line of her poster, which records the architecture and utility of the building in a series of documentary photographs. This is accompanied by a text declaiming the library's praises: 'It is a design classic: Look at its spacious, light-filled atrium — its airy aisles, it's a place to think and dream; reflect upon its clean Modernist lines — it's not unlike those we aspire to in this bright, fresh world.' With the building soon to be demolished due to regeneration, Thompson's project begs the question of who really benefits from such ruthless civic aspiration of amnesia and onwards and upwards mobility. Thompson's campaign, orchestrated to include the usual groups of the dispossessed and overlooked that seem to be on every worthy cause's hit list for chasing funding (deprived teenagers, struggling single mothers, marginalised pensioners, [insert platitude here] etcetera, etcetera...) puts this reciprocity of desire and need into similarly stark relief as *Dumb, hard*; who needs who the most, we might ask? One beneficiary of such a critique seems to be Thompson herself. A few crib notes to help you keep pace with the thickening plot: Focal Point Gallery (in which Thompson's exhibition will take place) is funded by Southend Borough Council, who want to knock down the library (in which the gallery is contained) and re-site it. Thompson is therefore criticizing the council for the regeneration scheme and rebuking the university for trying to take over the town, yet both are supporting her exhibition. Is this biting the hand that feeds, or, as the artist herself puts it, 'having your cake and eating it?'

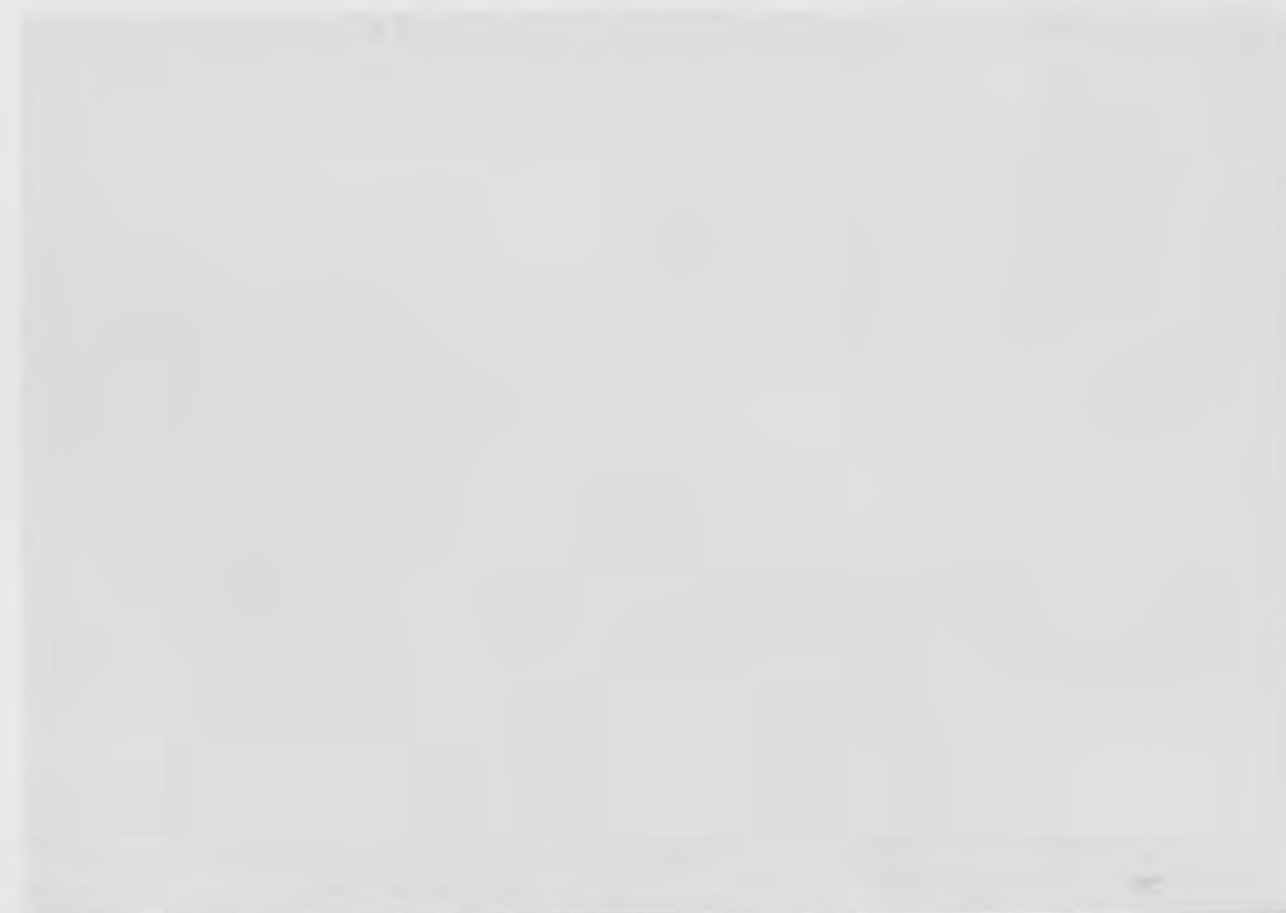
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We travel, some of us forever, to seek other states, other lives, other souls.
Anaïs Nin



DVD still #16



Aroma Venus, DVD, 10mins, 2009