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The ghost artist

Tracing spectral embodiment as a figure of aesthetic resistance, in an unknown woman's eighteenth century paintings, and works by Hilma af Klint and Louise Bourgeois

McNab, J.A.

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CONCLUSION

*What had she failed to reproduce
that now required all this damned
scribbling? Who was it for?*

Who was the ghost artist? Who is she today? This study has presented a conceptual figurine whom I argue has danced her way, unnoticed, through art history. A figure taken up by women artists who reject portraiture as an appropriate register of a life in which objectification is a lived bodily reality. A figure who has found fantasised forms of portrayal to step into, and whose aesthetic vitality thrums within the skins of these self-knowing stand-ins. A figure I have found within the logs, maps, embroideries, mirrors, and windows re-presented by artists working across three centuries.

The stand-ins that the anonymous notebook artist, Hilma af Klint, and Louise Bourgeois chose as holders of this figure, all came from objects close to their own bodies, ones they experienced regularly from the sensing side of their skins. And the aesthetic bodies they produced from meditative study of these objects all took serial forms. Making still objects function through time in this way obliges us as viewers to dance with the figurine in order to see her, and to use both memory and imagination in this visualisation of a non-naturalistic body, revealed as parts. The way each artist immersed this spectral idea of embodiment, of figures on the edge of vision, within what we could, expansively, call the representational stage of the still life, is a sort of 'natural magic' that reconfigures the body as a thing, and returns it as a situation in time. The dance of viewing builds towards a portrait of the vitality that animates all our skins; of the pulse within. Tracing this dance has required new research routes into both the notebook and the work of Hilma af Klint. These have utilized contemporary psychoanalytic concepts familiar to studies of the work of Bourgeois, but not to that of these earlier painters. Unfurling these ideas backwards in time has framed the notebook as the anonymous record of an older woman negotiating picture-making in an attempt to make sense of her inner world, and my writing has stepped

with her as she painted a new sort of body, one that might hold her subjective experience, an *imago* she was unlikely to have found within the image world around her. This art historical lack has left that painted body unrecognised until now, but once seen, it is as blurrily insistent, beneath its religious and alchemical masks, as the one beneath Cindy Sherman's masquerades.

She clicked and rose from the desk, concentration falling off like cold river water as she broke surface into the early evening sun. Her muscles delighted in its warmth, and her face re-mobilized out of its working rigor mortis. Walking to the big back windows, she looked out at massing clouds. She thought of her mother as she watched a lavender cumulus build high over the treetops. It seemed to be coming off the sea, and was rolling slowly up and right, along the coast. Lower and faster, on some local wind, a grande dame of cloudy sails was speeding the other way, head up and oars out, trailed by wispy outliers that were curled by an up-draught into sharp birds cawing home to their night time.

She poured a glass of wine from the bottle in the kitchen and went back to the window. The low clouds had become pale grey against the now inky darkness of the cumulus, and the sailing ship had become a lunatic head tossed upwards, and cackling at the end of the light.

It is a body that entered representation as a log floating in space, a choice that takes on the specular body, pulls it apart, and returns it as willed and *speculative*. The conceptual figure that makes this possible takes on the ghostly blank that the artist's mimetic self-portrayal would have presented to the world, and forcefully returns this as a body self-consciously insisting on a new form of presence, which both registers, and rejects, its cultural erasure. This feminist de-scripting of a received world-view belongs, amazingly, to the eighteenth century, but the ghostly figurine supporting it also flits through Af Klint's *Temple* cycle and Bourgeois' *Cells*. These are also serial bodies of work that displace self-portraiture, and return its potential for self-alienation — the realisation of one's object status in the eyes of others — within works that steep the artist's subjectivity within the 'skins' of domestic objects, and so take on the silencing power of objectification.



At around the same time as the notebook was being painted, and the gentlemen scholars of Europe were collecting and classifying their Enlightenment world, the Emperor of China was also busy cataloguing. In *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, historian Neil McGregor (1946–) recounts what happened when this Emperor came across an object he could not define. He was struggling to locate the history of an ancient jade ring, or *bi*, and in attempting to classify it, he compared it to other, similar, objects, collected what historical traces he could find, and admired its aesthetic achievements. However, he remained baffled as to the ring's actual use, and so he wrote a poem about his speculations, and had it carved into the back of the *bi*. This final intervention draws breath, but McGregor writes that he also admired the emperor's method because

thinking about the past [...] through things is always about poetic re-creation. We acknowledge the limits of what we can know with certainty, and must then find a different kind of knowing, aware that objects have been made by people essentially like us.³⁷⁴

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Neil McGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, Penguin Books, London 2012, p. xviii

Honouring the necessity of informed speculation lies at the heart of *The Ghost Artist*. And while I am not convinced that the subjectivity of a Chinese Emperor is 'essentially like' mine, historical lack has also led me to compare my objects to other works, collect what historical traces I could find, admire aesthetic achievements, and then make things up. Unlike the emperor, I did not record these impressions onto the bodies of the objects themselves, but like him, I have also sought to inscribe more than 'cold knowledge' of the scanty facts. I have sought to nudge the prism of these facts, to see what new rainbows might appear with a slightly different angle of light.

To do this, I have written a lot about tiny flicks of a brush, the spreading of mute blotches of colour, surfaces worked and scrubbed. These processes are not much like the process of writing about them however, and when I came to make my own paintings, my material thinking, such marks went up my arms and all over the floor. The results are the visual lacunae that have offered resting places within this narrative, taken from the serial bodies of *The Ice Cream Paintings* (2008–2016) and *D. I. Y.* (2014 to present). These paintings were made as life coagulated on me along with my paint, and built up as wrinkles, memories, and the twitchy scabs that irritate well-planned intellectual intentions. Slippery paint is a constant reminder of the unknowable qualities that are also held within completed artworks. This mute quality of the visual, the part beyond analysis, was known by those who made Emblem books, and has pressed through every aspect of *The Ghost Artist*, as it takes on marginalised lives and unrecorded histories. My initial glimpse of the historical body of a woman artist, a presence marked only by its absence, led me into

She took in the dark peach sky as tannin seeped through her tongue and her pupils dilated to cope with the fast waning light. The mouth on the cackling head was now wide open, and a bird was lifting out of it, spectral wings pointed down on each side as it ascended.

a spectral world of women's stories, and to summon its invisible bodies, I have had to look in black mirrors as well as books. Irrational joys and anxieties have undoubtedly seeped into the process, but believing that *these* historical figures might be 'essentially like' me, I have mingled written history with my own experience and imagination, and sought to cast new light on these bodies without organs, as a salute to the many bodies with, who sit in the shadows of this tale.

Art works are not lives, but sometimes their wordless presence can help to connect us to our own unspeakable selves. When we are 'touched' by a work, we are changed in some incremental way, and it was such a touch that sparked this writing. During a visit to a Louise Bourgeois exhibition at the Freud Museum in London,³⁷⁵ I became stopped while looking into the industrial cage of a Portrait Cell in a small upstairs room of the analyst's live-work family home. Mesmerised by a blasted lump of sewn serge, I had to strangle the impossible need to put my hand into its dark recess—a hole that spoke to some unknowable part of me. When I finally walked away, it was into a room full of cases displaying the artist's notes. Rage and fear spilled directly out of every scribbled detail, but not the vital experience of my own life being grabbed and held, and so I returned to woollen cavities, stitched up eyes, and claustrophobic rooms. Downstairs, a marble baboon³⁷⁶ stared at me, and I left struggling to control both legs and tears. Spiralling out of the encounter came this writing on the snakes and clouds and invisible worlds of the notebook; spirals that have bent and curled through *The Ten Largest*. They are roads into the vanishing point, or out of it, and they are the routing of our vision into the *Cells*. They spiral back to a bloody knife on the ground.

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Louise Bourgeois, *The Return of the Repressed*, curated by Philip Larratt-Smith, The Freud Museum, London, 2012

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This was *The Baboon of Thoth*, 30 BC – 395 AD. Thoth was the Egyptian god of wisdom and learning. Freud is known to have liked stroking the marble surface of this object, and it sat in a prominent position on his working desk (see the historical photographs in *Freud's Sculpture*, published by The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2006.) I do not know which *Cell* disturbed me so much. When I searched the catalogue raisonné, the work I remember is nowhere to be found.

The capacity of an art work to hold and share intensity can never be expressed as 'cold knowledge' as it is a constantly morphing power that exists between a material object and the evanescent ghosts of all our unknowable interiorities. Recognising this however, brings up the question of whose interiorities are deemed to matter to societies, and where the art might be found that each of us can recognise as our own, and revisit ourselves with. Searching for the seemingly invisible record of older women's life experiences led me to the life painted into the notebook, and studying how it performed its work, allowed me to connect it to that of other older women, and find a commonality in their practices. Negotiating this into visibility has meant looking at these better-known works from a different point of view to that already written down. The ghost story that this has created is one that records cultural negotiations between visibility and invisibility, who or what can be seen, has been seen, and who or what is in the shadows. In presenting these works of women artists as forms of portrayal, held within things, the woman portrayed 'as' thing is also present. I have

focussed on art that resists and returns this dehumanisation, and I have found it in older women's art practices. It may be that it takes half a lifetime to find a way to work out, and work with, the rage that all these works, in their different ways, insist on revealing. It may be that this is the raging embrace of the freedom that the invisibility of ageing skin, as the visible erasure of reproductive capacity, also brings.

I have traced this aesthetic act of resistance back through hundreds of years, but *The Ghost Artist* is a project of and for today. As human trafficking moves countless women round the world like cattle, and the 2017 Me Too movement refuses to be silenced, and workplaces in the West continue to support the careers of men over women, as hard-won reproductive rights are eroded, and women of the Global South additionally contend with FGM and female infanticide, I end with Catherine McKinnon's (1946-) description of what happens when women's bodies become images for the use of others.

As the human becomes thing and the mutual becomes one-sided and the given becomes stolen and sold, objectification comes to define femininity, and one-sidedness comes to define mutuality, and force comes to define consent as pictures and words become the forms of possession and use through which women are actually possessed and used. ³⁷⁷

³⁷⁷

Catherine McKinnon, *Only Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp.25-26

Pictures and words matter, and we all need to see our inner ghosts being valued, out there in the world. To this end, I have not focussed on images of objectification itself, but on the ways these women have flayed and returned their objectified bodies, in the notebook, the *Temple* cycle, and the *Cells*. It is a gesture I found in the representation of domestic objects touched by the sensing side of the artist's own skin. This sensing, this being alive, is the knowledge that is carried, as aesthetic vitality, in these stand-ins that name the cage and retreat of the home as their site. By imagining body representation differently, by skinning their conceptual bodies alive, and hurling them back through art, they aesthetically insist on life in the raw, but a unified body is never seen. It pulses like a ghost and leaves us to patch our own body image together with our own, viewing, minds; a shared work of spiralling and dancing, forwards, backwards, and around.