Acts of Cross-Pollination: Miranda Boulton's Still Life

When thinking about still life, a set of characteristics immediately come to mind. Domestic backdrops, a focus on the present moment, and – perhaps above all – an emphasis on the beauty of everyday objects: the sensuous feel and sheen of flowers and fruit. A certain tenderness and inwardness, a preference for melancholic pronouncements on the ephemerality of life. Miranda Boulton's still life, however, at once radically depart from these norms and remain productively tethered to the genre's rich history. They are wayward and wild, suffused with an energy that feels impervious to death, and dense with art historical citations.

The subversive intent of Boulton's work is best understood with an eye to the genre's thwarted critical reception. In Joshua Reynolds's influential *Discourses*, composed of lectures delivered at the Royal Academy in the late 18th century, still life was relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy of genres, which reflected the view of its superficiality and slightness since its origins in Northern Europe the 17th century. Partly its inferior status was because of the genre's association with feminine space – the kitchen, dining room and larder – as well as with women artists who, denied formal training or access to life models, could only paint what they spent their days surrounded by and hostage to. Boulton's work, which circles around the genre's genealogy with equal reverence, curiosity and experimental boldness, explores what it means to dedicate a practice to the overlooked, even the reviled. This project is explicitly feminist in recovering and reimagining a genre once mired in misogynistic assumptions, but Boulton handles these political ideas in an unexpected way.

Flowers are stripped of their associations with conventional femininity, what for centuries connected the ornamental function and essential frailty of flowers with women's bodies. Instead, these flowers are elastic, energetic and robust. Distortion strategies explode conventional verisimilitude, and produce stretched and melted bouquets which threaten to engulf the entire canvas. Yet these vivid, slippery masses remain recognisable as flowers. Boulton achieves this through accessing something of their essence as living organisms, and as sites of sensory experience. Smears of cherry red, butter yellow and a multitude of vibrant intermixtures refuse the status of the merely decorative, and assert upon the viewer a maelstrom of sensation. There is heat, sweetness, a pungent scent, and a headiness to the air. Boulton's alterations to the floral imaginary do not abide by any dreary gender binary: it is nothing as simple as substituting feminine for masculine. Boulton opts for a more ambiguous, electrifying vision: cut flowers that miraculously continue to live, and which defy their given materiality to become capacious, liquid entities. Her chosen environments, severe

muted backdrops bereft of any identifying details, register a similar shift away from gendered norms. These still lifes are not obviously set within studios, the masculine spaces which at once drew on and distanced themselves from domesticity. Nor are these recognisably lived-in rooms, an innovation which developed amongst women artists in the 20th century who were as interested in aesthetics as they were everyday experience. Boulton's still life exist in their own atmospheres, in possession of their own climate and gravity. Here all organic matter is volatile, brimming over with some mysterious force, and the air is as though saturated with an electrical current, the pale powdery trail of spray paint like a bolt of lightning.

A petal with the heft of animal muscle emerges out a stem that might keep on soaring upwards or outwards if it weren't for the edge of the canvas. Nothing ceases to thrive or spread, and exists in a state of becoming which thick impasto powerfully visualises, as though the one dimensional flatness of the canvas could not contain the sheer verve of these organisms, resulting in layers of dense floral mulch. The dynamism of these flowers has the feel of chemical intervention, an extraordinary fertiliser slipped into their water. But at least part of their expansiveness comes out of Boulton's relationship to the history of art. These works are saturated with thinking about the genre and its canonical practitioners, and never just in the mode of reference, or of establishing herself within a lineage. Boulton treats artists of the past as living resources to push against and experiment with, as interlocutors and channels of intimacy. The constellations guiding her work are many. Edouard Manet (1832-1883), Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904) and Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) recur alongside Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750), Mary Moser (1744-1819), Winifred Nicholson (1893-1981) and Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012), to name but a few. By recalling these artists together, their references threading from one work to the next, Boulton creates an imagined cohort of artistic ancestors, and raises questions pertinent to feminist art history. Why is it that when male artists painted still life it was considered profound – in Morandi's case, almost spiritually so – but when women engaged with the same subject matter they were judged narrow, minor, even amateur? In Boulton's spirited conversations with tradition, which treat all her chosen artists as equally valuable source material, these gendered distinctions melt away. Boulton's process ensures these influences never become overbearing. A Fantin-Latour, for instance, is studied in reproduction the night before a session in the studio, and the next day Boulton's painting proceeds from the memories of the image and her encounter with it, a technique which respects colour and presence over the recapitulation of precise details. Intuition is trusted, affinities in emotion or structure encouraged. The way an artist or artwork shapes Boulton's paintings is thus self-consciously indirect and unpredictable. One way of thinking about this process is as a form of cross-pollination: just as pollen is

carried in the wind from one flower to another, creating hybrids that cannot be foreseen, images from the genre's history merge and overlap in Boulton's paintings, and produce fresh forms. Cross-pollination makes plants stronger, sturdier, and there is a sense that the intensity of Boulton's flowers resides in their having reaped these same benefits.

These paintings are meditations on the history of art, but they are also alive to more urgent, emotional questions surrounding existence itself. Boulton's fluid, confident brushstrokes evoke the thrumming of life in the plant's every cell as much as the organic processes that signal its demise: rot, dissolution. For all their incendiary intent, some of the genre's traditional warnings about the brevity and preciousness of life, the closeness of blooming aliveness to the finality of death, remain. Yet the conversations Boulton stages in her works imply that death is not as incontrovertible as the genre warns, especially for an artist. Out of her still-life, multiple voices resound. For a second, these figures appear to congregate around the painting. Part of the joy of seeing a fragment of Mary Moser resurrected in a contemporary context is the glimpse it offers into Boulton's communing with the artist. Boulton extracts a rose from Moser's canvas and through an idiosyncratic method shaped by memory and dream it resurfaces as some splash of vermillion in the rich, sprawling ground of one of her canvases. Look closer, and it's possible to see these women's eyes meet and their fingers brush.

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