

Dalziel + Scullion – Artes Mundi

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Start with the human body. In the conventions of art history, the body is something to look *at*: nudes; figures in the landscape; portraiture. Dalziel + Scullion say something else – the human body is something to look *with*.

“Source”, draws attention to the body’s senses, of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch (one can almost feel the centipede on the child’s cheek). The work is divided into five parts, “in homage” to the five senses or “portals” as the artists call them, the openings of the human body “where the outside world comes in.” Beauty is in the body of the beholder; receptive, sensual and open. By implication all of us, gifted with senses, are sensitive, each of us born an artist; a graceful and profound statement of faith in the human body and spirit. There is gentle subversion here: their work provokes the question of *when* an artwork can be said to take place. The answer is not necessarily in the product but first in the receiving of the world.

But there’s more. Humans are not the only players. The deer is also watching the world, watching the camera and the child. The rock pipit has its point of view and is singing it. The sea has a way of being, has expressions. In one frame, the rocks circle a black centre, like the iris of an eye: even the rocks can see. “Source” uses the figure of a child because, say the artists, the senses or portals are “unfettered and perhaps more open in youth.” A child is old enough to have a point of view, but not powerful enough to inflict it.

In “More Than Us”, Dalziel + Scullion speak of “the reading of a landscape from an other than human perspective”, because there is an inherent impoverishment of vision if one allows only the human point of view. Consider the world with the nose of a mole and all is transformed. “Who speaks for Wolf?” said the Oneida Indians in council, to ensure that the perspective of the four-leggeds was taken into account in two-legged decision-making. “Who speaks for Moth?” is the question here.

Considering a viewpoint from the more-than-human world was brilliantly evoked in a 2002 work, “Raptor” – a short film of an openplan office after hours, a dull, deadened world of computers and fax machines. Suddenly you see a Harris hawk in all its alertness and vitality. Its talons, flight and mind comes as a relief to the wild soul in the human animal. The film invites you to see the office through the eyes of the bird, and suggests that the office might be a cage, temporarily for the bird but permanently for the human.

Dalziel + Scullion cite as influences the Deep Ecology of Arne Naess and David Abram; art to them is a “revolutionary ecological movement.” There is Deep Politics in this. There is something Copernican going on. The earth does not revolve around mankind; we are under the gaze of the deer, the hawk and the wolf where everything “co-exists as equal entities” as Dalziel + Scullion say. In that Deep Equality, everything has its story. A glacier can be an artist: they refer to “the glacial creator itself” – the glacier which authors whole landscapes. A swift (“epic little bird” according to Dalziel + Scullion,) tells its story of travel in “More Than Us.” The Scotch Burnet moth has a story of warning, warmth and colour, a niche of evolution

in a crevice of time. G.M. Hopkins in his poem “Inversnaid” describes how each thing sings its own song of itself: “Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*” There are other voices, the inner note of wind, cloud and river “the stories of landscape so improbable, so fantastic” as Dalziel + Scullion say. A world heard, for its own sake.

Cataloguing humans as just one species amongst many entails a revolt against anthropocentricity. One which can be funny. In “Habitat” (2001) four artificial concrete nest sites have been built for penguins, and the birds are filmed settling into them. The film is shown in a gallery setting and initially appears to be an artwork about penguins. But then you notice that four artificial nest sites (aka four plastic chairs from the furniture shop Habitat) have been set out in the gallery so that humans can settle down for a few minutes. It’s the softest of jokes for a fierce argument. (Dalziel + Scullion comment: “we see potential in being aggressively gentle.”)

Parallels are drawn between humans and birds in a work called “Migrator”, a commission for the World Business Centre at Heathrow, which films humans migrating in heavy metal tubes. Other migrators, though, are represented, for a soundtrack plays of the calls of Canadian Greylag Geese, Great Northern Divers, Curlews, Dunlin and Bittern. The juxtaposition is acute. The migrations of one species, *H. sap.*, looks ugly, unexpressive and polluting by contrast.

The motif of a circle runs through their work; the round of the Earth, of an eye, but also a circle as a means of embrace not a method of exclusion. There is none of the misanthropy which can mar the work of well-intentioned ecologists; for Dalziel + Scullion, we humans are not outside nature nor a blot on the landscape but fully and beautifully within it, in spite of some ugly aberrations. Humanity’s cruelty and barbarism towards other species is catalogued in “Aura A” (2003).

Since human thought began, mankind has always expressed itself artistically in relation to animals, insects, plants, land and weather forces. Art has always been immersed in nature. In that context much of Western art can seem extraordinarily narrow, a species-solipsism where human responds only to human, separated from the luminous, dramatic, laughing, talkative and varied world of the world itself. Dalziel + Scullion’s work never seems judgemental about this, rather their work seems to pity the sadness of such a divorce. We are kind with other species, kin, we are all of one kind, call it earthkind. Moth, ocean, swimmer, birch, wind and the sea.

The sea, the sea. I started listing the number of times the sea appears in Dalziel + Scullion’s work. The list grew too long; it would be easier to list where it wasn’t. From their earliest work it surrounds everything, indeed it probably stands in the same proportion to their work as the oceans cover the earth, some 70%.

The sea has many stories, many characters and significances but perhaps its deepest meaning to humans is Time. The shoreline represents the moment of now, while the ocean depths represent “eternity” for many cultures. In Taoist thought, the ocean is equated with the Tao, the primordial and inexhaustible source. “Source” suggests this, the eternal rolling ocean, endless in space and time. It recalls their work “Endlessly” (1997) where a stone angel is filmed from dawn to dusk and the film is

then speeded up to thirty minutes, while another screen shows the continual movement of the sea's surface. Elsewhere, Time features in their work, suggesting that, from the perspective of geological time, human time is tiny, "the small fleeting presence we scratch out on the surface of this spinning orb."

One of the commonest complaints of modernity is a perceived lack of time, with its concomitant speed and stress. Dalziel + Scullion's work says unhesitatingly: This. Now. Is the moment. And time enough. In its fully-presentness, their work has presence and also gives presence to both its subject and its audience. Their work offers a calmness, away from the frenetic chivvying of the metropolis and the tetchy trivia of television. In a very early work, "Rest" (1994), they designed a TV "screen" – a quiet pun, for their screen actually screens off the screen of the TV, covers up its buzzing hyperactivity. In "Rest," say the artists, "the presence of a TV was seen as a cause of anxiety, all humanity trapped inside; the owner of the cloth could bestow an act of calmness and rest the box and its contents."

Their work has a lucidity and serenity, and although they disavow any formal religion yet there is a spiritual aspect to their work, a recognition, they say, of "the need for rituals that mark significant rites of passage". In "Water Falls Down" (2001), a whole village from northeast Scotland came together to witness three adult baptisms in the North Sea. There is something frighteningly elemental, something with the chill of ancientness in this, ritual pared down to an acute simplicity. Simplicity is a hallmark of their work and it isn't surprising that one of their influences is the Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto, minimalist and mystic.

If I was asked to name a single quality I admire in their work, my answer would be "grace". They say of their work that they are "trying to explore mystery and wonder." There is no piety in this, but deep kindness, and a sense of healing. A philosopher who has greatly informed their work is Spinoza, who saw "god" not as a ruler outside nature but as something infinite and immanent within all – god is all and all is god. As if the world was lit from within. One of their most restorative works is a luminous table for the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary Sanctuary, a piece literally lit from within, for it has a soft blue calm light set within the table, for people needing solace in anxiety and bereavement.

The artists refer to a belief in transformation and "the idea of a calling, a voice." This informs not only what they create, but the quality of their gaze. Precise, careful, deliberated. Like other artists working with nature, such as Herman de Vries, they let the land speak. Unlike some proponents of Land Art, they don't impose details of their feet and their Fridays onto the work itself. They share with Ackroyd and Harvey a clarity of vision and a deceptive simplicity in their work with nature. Profoundly unegotistical and generous, they don't *pay* attention to the world as if that is an unpleasant debt but rather they *give* attention as a gift, an intense noticing. As if heightened emotion is part of all visual endeavour. "See it feelingly," wrote Coleridge. Their gaze has a fineness of calibration, and they also cultivate a habit of listening to the sound-world as acutely as musicians, as if they had an ability to hear extra octaves.

Arvo Pärt is one of the composers whose work they most admire, as is Ryojo Ikeda and Steve Reich, and they have collaborated with musicians, for example Craig

Armstrong in “One Minute” (2005) to superb effect, as if music compelled the clouds and the clouds compelled the birds to song or silence, as if a curtain of rain was a violin bow.

In the soundworlds they create, the human sounds are often minimal, as if only when the volume of human chat is turned right down can you hear the voices of the Others. In “Out There” (1998), they put a mobile phone in a plastic bag, threw it into the North Sea, and invited people to ring its number. It seems a quietly humorous comment on the shouty world of humans (“I’m on the *train*”). So the TV is resting, the mobile is somewhere in the North Sea, but the song of the rock pipit is piping loud, and water drops are round and beautiful as piping bells. Sound is a good way to portray invisible things, Dalziel + Scullion say, “the millions of micro-organisms in moss, or the thousands of insects deep within the stump of a tree.”

Their work uses what has been called the “technological sublime”. The techno-bit is obvious, but what of the sublime? “Sublime” recalls the Romantic movement, and Romanticism is a dirty word for many. It is used by urban cynics against artists and writers as if to condemn them with allegations of naïvety and falsity and childish yearnings for an “unreal” world of nature. It is a dishonest allegation; as if the weird techno-artifice of modernity, estranged from nature, is “living in the real world” whereas wood and water and mountain are somehow unreal. Dalziel + Scullion challenge this robustly: “Non-urban art is too easily pigeon-holed as not-about-what’s-real We seek to offer a different view of the world we inhabit... a world that we feel a fiery passion for, its potent energy that society has grown dangerously distant from and it’s not therefore a yearning for a bygone era, but much rather a fierce plea to recognise a possible future.”

There is also a cruel misperception of Romanticism too, as if to be “Romantic” means to be insipid, whimsical and tame. Not so. The artists and writers of the Romantic movement were revolutionaries. Romanticism, historical and contemporary, is ferociously wild, it carries a high political charge, fuelled by passion, justice, equality and whatever soars.

Like the most successful subversives, you can’t see ‘em coming. Dalziel + Scullion have carried out bombing raids in the belly of the beast, and yet have been cordially invited back. *This artwork is set to go off in five minutes. It will explode quietly but firmly inside your mind and every time you walk past it, it will fizz subliminally...* Their work “Migrator”, commissioned by BAA (British Airports Authority) is highly critical of the forms of human migration. One of their works, “Some Distance From the Sun”, installed at the headquarters of Halifax Bank of Scotland, is an apparently innocuous artwork about plants, but many of those depicted grew in the age when coal deposits were laid down, which fuelled the industrial revolution and the wealth of this bank. The artists comment: “The connection between financial wealth and mineral exploitation is often very strong.” Their work acts like a conscience within these institutions.

A laughing conscience, though, a subversion given to tender comedy. In “Lost Wave” (1997), a clear plastic beach ball is filled with water from the sea by the Dounreay Power Station. It combines the alien and dangerous toxic forces of the nuclear industry with the familiar innocence of a beach toy. And the very idea of a

wave being “lost” is simply lovely. Their work comprehends gravity, but it also comprehends levity. One of their works comprises the ark of the tabernacle compared to a budgie cage, and the benignly mischievous bathos of it made me laugh aloud.

It is playful, like Ian Hamilton Finlay’s humour; one of their works, “The Horn” (1997) plays music and hums, it has the sound of a lyrebird impersonating a kookaburra and plays tunes from the local Coalburn Silver Band. “Modern Nature”, (2000) broadcasts the call of the Capercaillie, extinct in Scotland, reintroduced and now rare again; the work looks like something out of a circus; plates balanced on poles, and it has the tragi-comic effect of clowning, as we humans, happy-sad, daft-clever, call “Please come back” to the bird in a piece of techno inter-species communication. Gravity and levity combined here as they are in life: nature, glinting right through art.