

## All That Remains

Ruin, eldest daughter of Zeus, she blinds us all, that fatal madness—she with those delicate feet of hers, never touching the earth, gliding over the heads of men to trap us all.

-- Homer, *The Iliad*.

### Ruin

In *The Iliad*, Ruin advances with light footsteps, entangling humanity in her wake. Not even the gods are immune to her seductive capacity for destruction and decay. She harkens Walter Benjamin's angel of history,<sup>1</sup> drawing back the veil of civilization to reveal wreckage piled upon wreckage. Here, the force of historical progress proves so powerful that the angel cannot close its wings against the storm and is propelled backwards into the future, face turned towards the past as the pile of debris grows ever skyward. Ruin is the architectural counterpart to *vanitas*, a material reminder of the transience of all life and the futility of our earthly aspirations. Her temple is that of utopian desire succumb to the forces of nature and history, themselves entangled with one another. In Ruin we seek the poetic enchantment of enduring material fragments of the past, in order to steal a glimpse of the future.

In the centre of the Koffler Gallery, Penelope Stewart has built a beeswax temple. Even before entering the gallery, the smell of wax overwhelms, luring the visitor to approach. Three exterior walls of the chamber are overlaid with unadorned wax tiles. One enters through a door that opens into an elaborate interior, the far wall of which is mostly missing, exposing a wax garden overgrown with vines and strewn with artifacts. Garlands of objects hang down like unkempt foliage, pooling into clustered piles. All is wax except for the door's wood and brass handled doorknobs; even the 2" x 4"s, which stand in as support of the deteriorated wall. The interior appears in stark contrast to the exterior, an ascetic modernist façade housing an ornate baroque heart within, like a spartan vault concealing hidden treasure. This, perhaps, is the seduction of Pandora's box, harbouring the material trappings of worldly ambition and success, tempting us astray. But this temple appears as ruin, seemingly abandoned to the forces of time.

Ruins have long been valued by artists for their unique melancholic aesthetic and moralizing symbolic attributes as *momento mori*<sup>2</sup>, material reminders of the cycle of life and the inevitability of death. Characterized by material fragmentation and standing concurrently inside and outside of time, ruins allegorize the struggle between nature and history, progress and tradition. They tap into humanity's desire to return to an idealized primordial moment in time and space – a lost paradise, of sorts – representative of something purer, untainted by the vices and distractions of contemporary life. In this, ruins have tended historically to trend in popularity at times of social crisis and anxiety, providing spaces for contemplative reflection on the past while forewarning utopia's capriciousness.

The cult of the ruin culminated in the European fantasy and "psychological gardens" of the late eighteenth century, in which landscape architects constructed fake ruins or follies, recreating classical temples, historical monuments, rustic pastoral huts and naturalized grottoes in artificially created states of decay. While such follies sought to access and possess the elusive truths associated with a romanticized past, they were ultimately built on deception; elaborately staged illusions simulating the effects of time and thereby commodifying both history and nature. In their fragmentary state of decomposition, such ruins represent a camouflaged melding of material history into the natural environment in keeping with a 'grotto aesthetic', an architectural *trompe l'oeil*, in which culture masquerades as nature, becoming "second nature." As Celeste Olalquiaga explains, "[a]s natural

ornaments, [fake] ruins immediately gained that final degree of inertia associated with all artifice. Nature was turned into a petrified version of itself and ruins were rendered into second-rate signs, imitators of life – or more appropriately, of still life, a form of death.”<sup>3</sup>

The longing for ruins during this period coincided with a rising interest in both natural history and secular still life and vanitas painting, as nature gradually gained autonomy from theological interpretation and fell under the empirical gaze of the scientific revolution. Nature thus became an empty signifier, literally enacting the processes of perpetual evolution and decay, itself caught by the conflicting dialectics of history. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, “Under the sign of history, the image of petrified nature is the cipher of what history has become.”<sup>4</sup> In Stewart’s wax folly, still life blends with ruin and nature and architecture merge and mimic one another— strings of objects become vines, which in turn simulate columns; flowers and fungi transform into tiles and architectonic embellishment; material artifacts metamorphose into organic matter. All become fossils.

### **Fossil**

In *Vanitas*, Stewart has created a Pompeiian scene that appears to capture life petrified in the very instance of its passing. Hundreds of domestic objects and natural specimens have been hand-cast in wax, creating a grand theatrical tableau. Piles of natural and cultural debris spill out from the refuge of Stewart’s ruin. Wax buttons, stones and mosaic-like miniature tiles are scattered throughout like doubloons, overflowing the walls of the ruin and trickling from the open mouths of toppled decanters. Garlands descend from the ceiling like lush object lists: columnar inventories of skeleton keys, egg-cup hollyhocks, hydrangea leaves, and succulents, accruing into clusters of heaped dinnerware discarded on the floor. Stacked against the gallery wall are handheld looking glasses, baroque-framed wax mirrors and empty picture frames, while pillar-like candlesticks are lined in rows as if forming the archaeological remnants of an ancient retaining wall.

These are the props of ‘nature morte’, the French term for still life that so evocatively entwines death with nature. In the genre paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a variety of objects were employed as moral signifiers of worldly ambition positioned alongside natural specimens, such as flowers and fruit at the peak of ripeness, illustrating the delicate tipping point between life and death while simultaneously teasing out the tensions between materialist desires and metaphysical meaning. Related to vanitas scenes were sumptuous banquet paintings, to which Stewart alludes in her dense accumulations of plates, bowls, utensils, tea cups, creamers, pitchers and goblets, many of which are elaborately decorated with classical scenes and baroque floral motifs. The banquet, as Julia Kristeva reminds us, stands outside of time. As a ritual of hospitality, familial bonding and nutritive communion, it represents “a foreigner’s utopia”, imagining itself “eternal in the intoxication of those who are nevertheless aware of its temporary frailty.”<sup>5</sup> Certainly, there are enough dishes here for a grand celebration, yet all is apparently abandoned, the food presumably eaten and the party long-since past. Like almost all of the objects in the installation, these paraphernalia of feast and festivity fail to fulfil their intended purpose.

Stewart has carefully chosen objects that are designed to function in some way as tools, extending the gesture and reach of the hand, and thus bridging the body to its material surrounds – plates, spoons, keys, buttons, candelabra, doorknobs, mirrors. Many of these objects blur the boundary between utilitarian (need) and luxury (want), transcending functionality through superfluous ornamentation. Indeed, decoration as poetic excess divides art from mere utility. Cast in wax, and accumulated en masse, these objects are literally made redundant, redundancy itself recognized as a luxury reserved for

the privileged few. Keys hang together in long lines, but there are no locks to turn. Doorknobs lie in piles and cluster like fungi on walls, with no doors to open. Candlesticks mounted horizontally on the tiled-wall, reach arm-like into space, their waxen limbs liable to melt along with the mislaid candles they are intended to support. Hundreds of buttons lie strewn on the floor with no cloth to bind. But perhaps most glaringly futile are the mirrors that hold no reflection, for mirrors promise to grant us the only objective glimpse of our bodies in their entirety, of ourselves as whole. But the subject cannot recognize herself here, for these mirrors reflect only absence.

In *The Tears of Things*, Peter Schwenger writes, in the spirit of Heidegger, that “[t]ools are part of an equipment that is used to construct not just a specific material project but a world.”<sup>6</sup> They are designed “to ensure its continuance and continuity,” while helping to undermine and conceal the existential angst that “underlies every human life.” Yet a sadness resides in tools because they are destined to ultimately “fail to save us from the pain of our primal condition.”<sup>7</sup> By rendering them redundant, as ‘post-social’, the artist reveals the melancholy of such things. Indeed, these artifacts are not the original objects themselves, nor even representations of such objects. Cast in wax, these are the death masks of things, and in this they bear an overt resemblance to the image of the skull, of which vanitas artists are so fond. For the skull is a special and unique kind of signifier, neither human nor object, it is no longer a person yet can never fully be severed from its humanity. Try as we might, we will never recognize ourselves in its reflection, yet we know irrevocably that it signals our fate.

Like the ruin, the vanitas object speaks to the “transitory splendor” of human civilization and the relentless fragmentation of history, capturing a moment in which “a constellation of forces [biological, historical, social, economic] is petrified,”<sup>8</sup> creating a fossil of a previously animate thing. For Benjamin, the fossil metaphor finds its definitive form in the mass produced commodity-fetish, which reifies nature in its bid to sell historical development as natural progress. In this, the image of the fossil materially “marks the survival of past history within the present, expressing with palpable clarity what the discarded fetish becomes, so hollowed out of life that only the imprint of the material shell remains.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, vanitas is Latin for emptiness and falsity. Here, in Stewart’s elaborate staging, the ruin becomes tomb. In the absence of ‘real’ corporeal remains, we are left surrounded by the dry husks of things, mere copies replicated ad infinitum.

## **Hive**

As much as Stewart’s structure may be read as a temple, a ruin, and a mausoleum, it is likewise a hive. If the image of the former captures the stagnancy of modernity and capitalist alienation, the image of the hive has long been a symbol of industriousness, idealized social labour and collective consciousness. For some time, Stewart has employed the beehive metaphor to engage the history of modernist philosophy, architecture and the utopian paradigms surrounding socially ‘responsible’ design. Drawing on the practices and ideologies of leading modernist architects such as Le Corbusier, Antoni Gaudi, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who sought inspiration from apian architecture and the perceived social harmony of the hive, Stewart has built an impressive practice of creating site-specific sensory architectures.<sup>10</sup> These works successfully counter Modernism’s masculine, rationalist and formally austere approach to social design with structures that incorporate decidedly more feminine and theatrically baroque elements, mediating the ordered civilizing impulse of culture against the perceived wildness and changeability of nature.

Taking a phenomenological approach to making, the artist builds her architectures from repeated graphic components and modules, aiming to create an embodied experience of a space by actively

engaging all the senses. These installations are immersive by design, drawing the viewer in through the overwhelmingly intoxicating scent and haptic lure of the wax. Every tile, object and architectural fragment is hand-cast in relief from silicone moulds. Produced in multiple, each repeatable copy remains unique through slight gestural anomalies that occur in the casting process, as well as variations in the colour and scent of the wax, determined by the age of the wax and the various pollens collected by bees from different regions. For centuries, wax has been valued by artists for its translucency and its unique mimetic ability to take on the shape and textures of other forms and surfaces. Malleable and easily moulded, wax is the ideal conceptual and practical medium for Stewart's sensory architecture. An artifactual product of bees, wax is the material with which they build their own apian social structures. Symbolically, it is likewise associated with the residue of history itself, and as such eloquently speaks to the ways in which all things succumb to the forces of time.

In Stewart's constructions, all is subject to evolution – tiles and objects are repeatedly dismantled, melted down and recast into newly fantastical objects and designs, holding onto the constancy of process while ever becoming something else. In highlighting the interrelationship between copy and original, history and nature, the artist aims to harness the disruptive potential of mimesis to enact change in the world through principles of sympathetic exchange – like influencing like. Such sympathy works not only to reveal the dystopic failings of the past, but likewise turns its dialectical gaze on the present and the ever-growing contemporary tensions between capitalist interests and social welfare, urban development and environmental conservation. Yet as much as we may be concerned with the impact of technological developments on human culture, bee society itself is in crisis, afflicted by what biologists have termed "Colony Collapse Disorder". Since 2006, millions of bees have been dying and disappearing from hives, and it is estimated that Canada has been losing an average of 30% of its colonies each year.<sup>11</sup> The causes are widely debated and indeterminate, but the situation is undoubtedly exacerbated by human influences on the environment, including pesticide use, industrial pollution and urban encroachment. The long-term impact on our food chain, and the associated economic and social costs, could be irreversibly devastating.

In the entrance of the gallery, Stewart has placed two rows of bee skeps; wax-cast replicas of antique manmade hives that often necessitated the destruction and sacrifice of the entire colony in order to harvest the honey. They are lined up like sentries – or mourners. The capacity for wax to take on the form of whatever material it casts creates near flawless copies of the wicker originals, save for the untrimmed wax seams intentionally left by the artist to shatter the illusion. These skeps are reminders of what is at stake – for nature and for history. While turning her gaze on the past, the artist simultaneously looks towards a future in which we strive to remain accountable to history while concurrently taking responsibility for our place in the natural world of which we are an integral part. To return for a moment to the myth of Pandora, after all the evils and material temptations are let loose on the world, all that remains is hope.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico 1999), 249.

<sup>2</sup> *Memento mori* is Latin for "remember you will die."

<sup>3</sup> Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (London: Bloomsbury 1999), 140.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (London, England and Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 1989, rep. 1999), 161.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Strangers to Ourselves", in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press 1997), 272.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2006), 128.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Hito Steyerl, "The Language of Things", <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0606/steyerl/en> (accessed on July 16, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Buck-Morss, op. cit., 160.

<sup>10</sup> Refer to Jenn Law, "Chasing Daphne", in *Penelope Stewart: Chasing Daphne, A Beeswax Architectural Intervention at Lotusland, Montecito, California* (Gravenhurst, Ontario: The Tree Museum 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Natalie Goldenberg-Fife, "Bees in Crisis", *City Bites: Toronto's Guide to Great Food and Drink*, Summer 2014, 24. Also see Bryan Walsh, "The Plight of the Honeybee", *Time*, August 19, 2013, 24-31.