

Chasing Daphne

All becomes suspense, a fragmentary arrangement of alternating and facing elements, contributing to the total rhythm, which may be deemed the silent poem, with its blanks; translated only in singular manner, by each pendentive.

-Stéphane Mallarmé, *Crise de vers*, 1895.

I wonder if they would forget me

If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.

-Sylvia Plath, *The Arrival of the Bee Box*, 1962.

The Bee Sequence

In October 1962, as her marriage was falling apart, Sylvia Plath wrote five extraordinary poems about bees. Collectively known as the Bee Sequence, the poems follow a cyclical trajectory of apian husbandry and the seasonal evolution of the hive. In each poem the speaker's psychological preoccupation with her precarious place in the social world is formally echoed in Plath's unique style of poetic excess, progressing from social anxiety in the first poem to increasing individual self-knowledge, assurance and tentative hope by the end. Overlaid with the classical myth of Daphne, an allegory of feminine transgression and becoming, the poems embody a culminating moment of personal and poetic crisis, self-assessment and creative transformation.

Toronto-based artist Penelope Stewart has likewise been drawn to bees and the rich metaphoric and poetic associations that have historically accumulated around the social significance of the hive. Since 2007, Stewart has constructed her own sequence of apian exchanges composed of a series of print and sculptural works as well as several elaborate wax-tiled architectural installations in France, Canada and the United States. Inspired in part by Modernist architecture's embrace of the beehive metaphor as a model and symbol of utopian idealism, Stewart's artinally handcrafted sensory structures reflect her ongoing engagement with the relationship between nature and the built environment and the social construction of private and public space.

Most recently in the spring of 2013, Stewart created a wax chamber at Lotusland in Santa Barbara, California, an historic estate set on 37 acres of botanical gardens. The property was purchased in 1941 by Polish-born opera singer and socialite, Ganna Walska, who lived on the estate for 43 years, designing unique theatrical garden displays and amassing a celebrated collection of rare horticultural specimens. Entitled *Daphne*, Stewart's installation, like Plath's poetry, combines the rich imagery of apian symbolism with the myth of Daphne.

As told in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, the water nymph Daphne, daughter of Gaia and the River God Pineios, is relentlessly pursued by the God Apollo, who is enchanted by her beauty.

Determined to resist possession, Daphne spurned the advances of many suitors, ignoring her father's pleas to marry and bear children. On the verge of capture by Apollo, Daphne turns to

her parents for assistance, imploring them to change her form as a means of escape. They thus transform her into a laurel tree, and Apollo, in turn, grants her eternal youth and immortality, so that her leaves might remain evergreen and she may never know death or decay. In this, Daphne has come to represent both change and constancy, radical transformation tempered by eternal return. She is a liminal figure caught on the threshold between social expectation and the emancipation offered through creative innovation and reinvention.

While poetically serendipitous, it is perhaps unsurprising that both poet and visual artist should overlay apian imagery with the classical myth of Daphne to convey the struggle between the individual and the social collective. The natural manufacturing and architectural capabilities of bees alongside their complex social organization have long inspired poetic comparisons between the hive and civilization, apian behavior and human civility. As Claire Preston writes, “the bee stands as an emblem to man’s relation to nature and to himself.”¹ Indeed, the links between poet and artist are far from tenuous, extending beyond shared allegorical and thematic interests into sympathetic formal and prosodic strategies of conceptual and material composition. Most significantly, is their mutual embrace of poetic excess as a strategy of composition, a building up of textual and material thickness through the repetition of elements that not only creates a sense of intensity and insistency, but offers a means of social critique, challenging the limits of the media they engage.

The Poetics of Space

While Plath’s Daphne is haunted by the tragic biographical details of her personal life, Stewart’s is intertwined with the creative personality of Ganna Walska. By all accounts, Walska was an eccentric and somewhat misunderstood character, who struggled for critical acceptance as a performing artist, often finding herself on the margins of polite society. Certainly for her time, Walska defied convention and was viewed as controversial for her excessive lifestyle. Beautiful and flamboyant, she married six times, gaining greater notoriety for her ability to attract wealthy husbands than for her singing talent. Her true love and passion, however, was her garden at Lotusland, which served as both creative outlet and personal retreat until her death in 1984 at the age of 97. Like Daphne, Walska ultimately escaped fulfilling the socially prescribed traditional feminine roles of wife and mother, turning in retreat, quite literally, to nature.

Surrounded by the gardens, Stewart installed her wax chamber in the small bungalow where Walska elected to live on the estate, finding it a more intimate place to reside than the imposing Spanish-style mansion on the grounds. As with her previous wax rooms, Stewart’s installation engages the existing architecture as both conceptual and physical support and frame, incorporating competing social and historical narratives into the work’s very composition and construction. However, where Stewart’s previous wax architectures were installed in public gallery contexts, *Daphne* emerged in a significantly more intimate milieu. Here, in the space where Walska called home, the work is further layered with the residue of personal memory and biographical detail.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Guy Bachelard places special emphasis on the house as poetic image, serving as the ideal subject for “a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space”; which he refers to as “topoanalysis.”² Indeed, the house is the most intimate of all spaces, a place of inter-subjectivity and daydreaming, where we repeatedly return in our imaginings. Here, the past is forever entwined with the lived present not through temporal memory per se, but rather through a spatial projection of images both real and imagined. As Bachelard puts it, “we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.”³ Bachelard’s phenomenology is not interested in description or the objective structure of poetry, but rather with the epiphanous moments innate to the poetic image that are experienced outside of that structure and therefore come closest to touching individual consciousness. In this way, the poetic image stands outside of time. It is the space in which the image dwells, that immerses us and commands memory.

Similarly, Stewart’s phenomenological approach to making aims at creating a spatially embodied experience of the work. Composed of recurring graphic components, her installations play with poetic rhythm and pattern, built up in layers, tile by tile, module by repeated module. Each 4” x 4” wax tile is hand-cast in relief from silicone moulds. Though produced by the artist in multiple, every tile remains unique, revealing slight gestural variations in texture and line during the casting process. The tiles likewise vary in scent and colour, ranging from pale yellow to golden to a deep honey brown, dependent on the age of the wax and the types of pollen collected by bees in different regions. Assembled en masse, the fragrance of the tiles is intoxicating and cloying, all-consuming in its olfactory reach, drawing bees from miles around. Stewart cast the tiles for *Daphne* on-site, while resident at Lotusland. Occasionally curious bees would fall into the molten wax-filled moulds, forever entombing the apian spectators in the finished tiles.

Malleable, tactile and amenable to casting, wax is the ideal building material for Stewart’s sensory structures, both conceptually and practically. Wax is, as Preston describes honey, “a behavioural artefact of the artisanal civilization of bees.”⁴ But wax also speaks to time’s passage more broadly and is often specifically associated with the residue or patina of history itself. Here Stewart’s wax room is both museum and mausoleum, built on aesthetic and historical fragments and thus bearing close resemblance to the ruin.

Ruin

The ruin has a lengthy history as a poetic image in art and literature, alternately cast as a “repository” of historical knowledge, a Romantic symbol of artistic creation and a vacillating harbinger of both nature and culture in distress. It is always threatened by decay. The Modern ruin has come to stand as a material reminder of the transience of all life and the fragile utopian aspirations of human ambition. It reveals not only the traces of what has come before but hints at what might have been, forever gesturing towards some ever elusive sublime truth. In the ruin, we capture a melancholic glimpse of our guaranteed mortality, of culture reclaimed by nature. But the ruin likewise holds within it the promise of redemption.

For Walter Benjamin, the ruin is intimately linked to Baroque allegory, which privileges fragmentary representation and thus facilitates an extended multi-dimensional view of history. He writes: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.”⁵ Likewise for Stewart, the ruin is understood as both object and process; a means of challenging historical truth and totality and “demythifying” symbolic meaning.⁶ Baroque allegory with its multiple shifting perspectives and fractured vision provides the ultimate antidote to Modernism and its singular ocularcentric perspective.

Stewart’s material retelling of the allegory of Daphne is emphatically baroque in approach. Elsewhere I have noted that the starting point for Stewart’s work is “often found in architectural fragments and graphic details – aesthetic phonemes, if you will – focused and isolated and then recombined into new visual language patterns and contexts.”⁷ In earlier work, Stewart turned for inspiration to the social philosophies and practices of iconic Modern architects such as Le Corbusier, Antoni Gaudi, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who emulated natural apian architecture and the collective harmony of the working hive by employing honeycomb motifs in their designs. Thus, for example, Le Corbusier’s plans for modular, cell-like, individually stacked apartments, was aimed at solving the 1920s urban housing crisis in Paris’ slums. Such projects grew into utopian designs of entire cities, culminating in Le Corbusier’s 1935 proposal for The Radiant City, which imagined an urban environment purged of decay and replaced by a new architecture built from steel, plate glass, and reinforced concrete.

But the Modernist agenda, characterized by its purported commitment to egalitarian social reform, ultimately failed to live up to its social and aesthetic promises. Stewart skillfully plays with such contradictions and juxtapositions of utopian idealism and its dystopic failings – transforming Modernism’s urban blueprints into patterned architectural tactile embellishment. In this, the artist translates and reinterprets the graphically geometric, economically rendered designs for Modernism’s monumental structures into theatrical spaces, altogether more intimate and engaging.

Michael Mehaffy and Nikos A. Salingaros argue that Modernist architecture in part faltered because of its lack of ornamentation, writing that “[o]rnamant may be what humans use as a kind of ‘glue’ to help weave our spaces together. It now appears that the removal of ornament and pattern [such as happens in Modernist design] has far-reaching consequences for the capacity of environmental structures to form coherent, resilient wholes.”⁸ Along similar lines, architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa argues that the ocularcentric leanings of Modernism resulted in structures that create distance and alienation between the individual and the built environment. In reaction, Pallasmaa calls for the creation of multi-sensory architectural spaces, aimed at facilitating a sense of embodied engagement, integration and belonging.⁹ Surely Stewart’s wax chambers achieve just this. They are sensorially immersive by design.

Poetic license

If Stewart's previous tile work, including *Parois* (2007), *Apian Screen* (2010) and *Vicissitudes* (2011), was rooted in the creation of formally ordered patterns via the repetition of graphic architectural components and controlled tessellation, *Daphne* is based on the poetic principles of excess, repetition, accumulation and transformation. In this, Stewart turned to Walska's garden for inspiration, which is histrionic, organic and feminine in its approach to landscape design. Counter to the dominant Modernist landscaping trends of the time, which were generally spare and formally linear, Walska stayed true to her theatrical leanings, creating a botanical retreat that may be viewed as Dionysian in spirit. She organized her garden into dramatic massed groupings of plants and objects, creating distinct yet interconnected botanical "rooms". The garden here becomes a stage of sorts, populated by clustered plantings of palms, euphorbias, cacti, and succulents, which carpet the estate and are interspersed with unusual architectural components, cast-off slag glass fragments, shells, curio objects and tiles.

In poetic response, Stewart covered the entrance wall of Daphne's wax chamber in close-knit huddles of wax lotus pods. Cast from life and arranged in teeming strips like a fervent musical score, each lotus-heavy line alternates with a bar of blank wax tiles, which essentially function as the pauses and silences upon which all music or poetry relies. The artist explains that the lotus bands likewise reference the distinctive stripes of Sienna's famous cathedral, representing a harmonious marriage of overlaid styles compiled over the centuries, combining elements of Medieval, French Gothic, Tuscan Romanesque, and Classical architecture.

The lotus pods creep around the corners of the room as if seeding themselves, tentatively intermingling with a wall of massed wax succulents cast in five different sizes on one side, and a wall of perpendicularly attached wax-cast architectural fragments – faucets, doorknobs, pineapple doorstops – on the other. The sheer excess of ornate adornment accumulates on the walls like growths, both natural and manmade. Protruding objects appear to reach out, limb-like, as if they intend to eventually fill not only the walls, but the cavity of the room itself. Like many of Stewart's installations, this is a space both comforting and suffocating, delicately poetic in its orchestrated rhythmic clusters and deafening in the sheer volume of its materiality. Here, excess and possession scream of want and desire.

In Daphne's chamber, the promise of emancipation is forever imperiled by futility made material: cast doorknobs do not open, fountainheads hold no water, door-stops act as endpoints. Props of liminality, they hold Daphne in stasis on the threshold of transformation. But even if it arrives, transformation has its caveats. Terrifyingly, Daphne's escape from Apollo – her metamorphosis into a laurel tree – becomes a new form of entrapment. In the end, the only way in which Daphne can truly transcend social expectation and the looming roles of wife and mother that relentlessly pursue her, is to become something other than human (a tree), and thus risks losing herself in the process.

And yet, it is precisely her humanity that draws us to her story; her desire to be something more than – in excess of – what social decorum demands. The allegory of Daphne perseveres; its fragmentary retelling transcending time and gesturing beyond to a pile-up of poetic images that forever accumulates around its edges. It is here that the story can turn in endless

directions; where artist and poet may converse and find sympathy in each other's vision. Bachelard writes: "When two strange images meet, two images that are the work of two poets pursuing separate dreams, they apparently strengthen each other."¹⁰ Daphne's story merges with Walska's and that of the bees. For all man's attempts to domesticate them, they refuse to be tamed.

Stewart reminds us that it is in pushing against convention that the greatest art is made. Amidst the angst and uncertainty of the threshold, the promise of creative transformation continues to beckon us. Even for Plath, in the final poem in her Bee Sequence, written a mere few months before her death, hope glimmers faintly in the darkest moments of *Wintering*: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring".¹¹ Perhaps here, in the sanctuary of Stewart's wax chamber with the garden unfolding beyond, Daphne can finally stop running.

¹ Clare Preston, *Bee* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2006, Kindle file).

² Guy Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 3, 8.

³ *Ibid*, 6.

⁴ Preston, 2006.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998), 178.

⁶ See Naomi Stead, "The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer", *Form/Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Built Environment*, no. 6 (October, 2003), 51-64.

http://naomistead.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/stead_value_of_ruins_2003.pdf

⁷ Jenn Law, "Notes from the Margins of Empire", in *Printopolis*, eds. Tara Cooper and Jenn Law (Toronto: Open Studio, forthcoming 2014).

⁸ Michael Mehaffy and Nikos A. Salinger, "Towards Resilient Architectures 3: How Modernism Got Square", *Point of View: The Metropolis Blog*, April 19, 2013. <http://www.metropolismag.com/Point-of-View/April-2013/Toward-Resilient-Architectures-3-How-Modernism-Got-Square/>

⁹ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2012, Kindle file)

¹⁰ Bachelard, 1969, 59.

¹¹ Sylvia Plath, "Wintering", in *Ariel* (The Restored Edition, a facsimile of Plath's manuscript, reinstating her original selection and arrangement) (London: Faber & Faber, 2010, Kindle file).