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Unsettled: Jennie Temple's Ethnographic Objects

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What illuminations might come from trying to gain purchase on a person's biography by asking them to talk about the objects they own and live with rather than prompting them to recite a linear narrative of their life story? This question was posed by anthropologist Janet Hoskins in the late 1990s, a time when social scientists were considering deeply the ramifications of two decades of neoliberal globalization and its effects on cultures across the world. They were turning their attentions specifically to the importance of the flow of 'things'- people, commodities- across increasingly 'open' routes and borders, and examining the implications this had for how identities are formed and negotiated in relation to shifting centres of power under deregulated capitalist markets. In other words, they were interested in the ways in which things (including borders) are always 'on the move', and bring with them (as well as creating new) stories about the world, individual people and cultures.

At the same time, while acknowledging the mobility of objects through space and time, Hoskins, along with a host of others writing about the social and cultural significance of 'things' in that period, began to acknowledge that there is a sense in which they can also be 'rooted' to particular anchors- people or places, maybe other objects- and both mediate *and* embody individualised, localised selves, histories and practices. Objects are thus always 'things in themselves' *as well as* unfixed, magical portals leading to other dimensions; mutable and mobile, yet somehow simultaneously stable and singular.... always unsettled, with the potential for the seemingly static to transform into *something else* at any given moment.

The works in Jennie Temple's *Ruined* and the overall relations between them intentionally perform precisely these multiple roles. She is explicitly concerned in many ways, like Hoskins, with the kinds of questions that characterized and preoccupied anthropologists in the 1990s, a particularly formative time for her as she attended art school and began a regular art practice. There is a clear concern here within the objects, all made specifically for this particular exhibition, about globalized elements of culture as seen, for instance, in the circulation and appropriation of commodities, as well as how, specifically, some of these have come to symbolically embody particular cultural expressions rooted to particular times and places. Traversing seamlessly between meta-discourses that sketch out a portrait of the neoliberal world from the 1990s to today, and the autobiographical qualities that these things play in shaping Temple's personal life and interior world (and, presumably, those of her generation more generally), the works here construct separate and intertwined narratives.

Biographical/Universal Objects

As a life story, the artworks in *Ruined* are both contemplative and restrained, as well as overtly full of humour and joy. Seen in the context of kinship and domestic life, they can be melancholy; meditations on what it might mean to feel tied to, and therefore constrained by, normative structures that govern everyday life in the west. What does it mean, for instance, to feel wedded to aspirational economic expectations in relation to kinship ties? To feel under pressure to have to purchase, say, a high end pram, which features in one of the large paintings, in order to act as a good mother in the hetero-normative family unit, lest risk being seen to give that child less than s/he deserves? How might boutique wallpaper transform from being an aspirational home interior, to an

object slightly inflected with elements of humour and horror, with the inclusion of a dragon-like creature in the repeated design?

Household plants occupy an interesting status in *Ruined*, and feature here in different iterations, from realised sculptures to representations in painting. In particular, the detailed sculpture of a plant acts as a memorial to a particular phase of Temple's life; a representation of a living thing that eventually dies, taking with it relationships and moments- both 'good' and 'bad'- that can never again be grasped or relived except through the hazy, imprecise lens of memory. There are, too, representations of fragments of a domesticated hydra plant, appearing here as over-sized, soft sculptures that are at once funny because of their sheer size in comparison to the small stature of the actual plant, but could also easily tip over into disturbing, surreal entities that have the potential come alive and attack the inhabitants of the home or exhibition space. The vibrant Adidas logos that constitute what could be read as a floral arrangement or a potted plant point to a concern with, or perhaps a guilt about, a kind of cultural appropriation of the materialities of symbolism largely associated with black American hip hop culture as translated in Temple's homeland of Scotland specifically during the 90s. The inclusion of the logos here is potentially a comment on the ways in which that appropriation embodies the negative aspects of economic globalisation in the seemingly all encompassing ability of capitalism to recuperate the once radical resistances that some things 'stand for' in particular times and places can be recuperated and tamed, and subsequently sold back to us as a 'lifestyle'.

While all the objects here embody an existential darkness in relation to conventional domesticity and the subordination, particularly of women's selves and individual identities (a subject with which much of Temple's previous work is concerned) to 'traditional' gender roles and divisions of labour, as well as economic globalisation and the consumer subjectivities these tend to produce, they equally, though, suggest the joy to be experienced in the life cycle; memories of relationships and identities forged in youth, parenthood and the task of endeavouring to raise a healthy, happy family.

The poetic context of the painting in which the pram and the Adidas logo appears, for example, points as much to various rites of passage within Temple's own life, in her journey from formative years as a young woman forging an identity and relationships in using elements of style that embodies the joy in the rhythm of hip hop, to her eventual role as a partner and parent. Equally, the humour and playfulness symbolized in some of the objects, like the soft sculptures, or even in the horrific though somehow darkly funny representation of the dragon in the wallpaper, all work, perhaps, to impart to her children, her partner, and to herself and her audience, the often preposterous, ridiculously sublime and surreal elements of life.

The Magic of Things

All of the objects in *Ruined* are both fixed and mobile, and constantly produce and reproduce new meanings as they become refracted in memory, and possibly projected into the present and future. They are a lesson in showing that all objects are useful to *think through*, rather than simply to *think about*; stitches in time that will lead to new scenarios in the future through Temple's life trajectory, or to piece together new narratives about her own (or anyone's) past, or to contemplate, through cut-up and collage techniques in the present, different ways of thinking about an individual life or global conditions today.