

kate palmer **pushing the blood back into my fingers**

broadbent



## pushing the blood back into my fingers

"We have to go outside ourselves to get back inside."

Darian Leader, *The New Black*

This recent work represents a conclusion, and a new beginning. It comes at the end of a three-year period when Kate Palmer focused exclusively on drawing, in an attempt to grasp what it was she had lost, what perhaps she had never had and now could never imagine having, with the death of her mother. During this time, she used always the same paper, the same format. As much as to say, always the same problem. The same process: a monoprint and a response in charcoal. The same compositional structure: two elements drawn towards the centre. The work explored the relation between these two motifs, these two entities, and more particularly the gap that lay between them.

The drawings here share the same size and paper, but the binary structure is transformed: here there is overlap, obscured or eroded though it may be at times; there the gap gives way to contact in the face of an energy as forceful as it is tenuous. Elsewhere the thin line finds a new density, a scarring that is a quickening, a congealing that hints at liquid depth.

These developments coincided with, if they were not prompted by, a trip to Switzerland, where she had lived for the first seven years of her life.

My grandmother died last year, and on impulse I booked a trip to Saas-Fee, in the Alps – a small, stunningly beautiful village 1,800m up on the edge of

a glacier. I had wanted to learn snowboarding and my partner had always wanted to ski. I hadn't been at all sure what it would mean to me, to be back in Switzerland, but on our way up to the mountains we passed Lausanne, where we had lived, and I suddenly felt the loss of those years. I was reeling with memories: the elaborate flowerbeds on the edge of Lake Geneva, hiking in the mountains in the summer, florentines and hot chocolate on special mornings. These things and so many others flooded back to mind, wonderful and painful at the same time.

As for Saas-Fee, I wasn't sure what to expect except for hours in the snow – mainly on my back or on my face – but for the first couple of days I felt weak, breathless and nauseous from altitude sickness. At the same time, there was a sense of profound recognition. The dry air, the mountains that really do come to sharp points with snow on top, the smell of the trees, the Alpine chalets, the bright sunshine, and the Swiss flag – perfect, the best

designed of any. The Swiss are proud of their flag, as I had been as a child, and Saas-Fee was littered with red and white merchandise.

Talking about it now, Kate comes out with what seems a surprising parallel, recalling Ted Hughes's short story "The Rain Horse." A young man walking a very different landscape, bleak and raw, encounters a horse that pursues him, beautiful in its animality yet so dangerous to him that he must destroy it. Having done so, he is left numb, "staring at the ground as if some important part had been cut out of his brain." But neat picture-postcards leave a lot out, too.

I've become passionate about snowboarding, for the landscape, for the speed, most of all, perhaps, for the fluidity of it – moving my weight from one edge of the board to the other, slow-rolling like mercury, tight and contained but quick and reactive. Sometimes the rhythm of my carved arcs is interrupted, rocks, trees or people needing a sudden response, a recalculation.

As I follow the new line down, slung cables pass overhead, sharp ski lines slash the snow, and the vivid blue shadows of trees cut across the slopes.

Down at the bottom, I rest, feeling my blood pulsing through my body, throbbing in my fingers. And now, on my way up again, suspended in a cable car, I look down at the tracks in the snow, wounds in the smooth skin, lines on the paper.

And here Kate comes up with another unexpected association, a scene in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* where the supposed Dr Edwardes, played by Gregory Peck, is disturbed by lines drawn with a fork on a white tablecloth by Ingrid Bergman's Dr Constance Petersen. Edwardes isn't Edwardes, she finds out. He's suffering from amnesia, he doesn't know who he is, but thinks he may have murdered the doctor he was pretending to be. The search for a solution to the stranger's mystery takes us, through the interpretation of his dream – a dream designed by Dalí – to the ski-resort where Edwardes met his death, and where he remembers

who he is. John Ballantine now also remembers the scene when as a child, sliding downstairs, he had accidentally killed his brother. And it is this forgotten trauma that has led him to blame himself for Edwardes' death. The sleuthing that sees Dr Petersen finally confront the true killer begins with a wrinkle in the white fabric; her curiosity is provoked by Ballantine's reaction; but that liminal mark is itself a quickening in her own blankness, the awakening of desire.

We talk too about Peggy Phelan's discussion of Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St Thomas*, where Phelan suggests that in making possible the illusion of interiority and depth, perspective by the same token turns paintings into bodies. In both paintings and bodies, the play of surface and depth replays the relation of signifier and signified in language. For embodied subjectivity, enclosed in its own skin, the question of meaning becomes the question of love. Am I seen, am I heard, am I real for the other? For Caravaggio, says Phelan, Jesus is as doubtful as Thomas and needs to find his own proof in Thomas's belief. There is no God outside the

language of relation; at least, our most intimate, fundamental, unanswered and unanswerable questions can find responses only from human others, and from them no certainty. For us, depths are always surfaces.

Writing about Kate's earlier work, Jean Khalifa remarked: "How difficult it is *not* to represent a thing!" Shapes, textures and colours suggest shades and borders; in the presence of the latter, the mind rushes to objects, and these objects conjure up a world and a point of view. Working on and against these suggestions, she sought to scrape and strip away the appearances of objecthood, to reveal an inchoate energy, a thrum of sensation. This was, one might say, depth without interiorities. The new paintings return to the same preoccupations, but as schooled and tempered by the last three years of drawing. In them, the "gap between" is relocated between the rigour of surface and the promise of depth. However, just as in the drawings a strict binary division has given way to greater complexity, the surface now

has lost its all-over, all-deconstructing omnipotence, allowing a new freedom within the same constraint.

Surface does not cancel out the depth of our human objects, even though these may never bring with them the final assurance of their and our existence. On this tablecloth, there is room for the fork. It makes space for sleuthing, for the hope of finding that is desire. And we in turn can acknowledge our track through the snow. Not in certainty but in doubt does Thomas's finger find redemption.





