



POSTNATURES: HEAVY WATER COLLECTIVE

ESSAY BY LAUREN VELVICK

The objects and images in Heavy Water Collective’s vitrine overlap with each other. Things made from ceramics, soap, carbon, wax, oil and knotted rope lie atop found, reproduced and digitally edited images on paper and card. Some are printed on matte photo paper whereas others are tiny oil paintings, and while not quite scattered, they are not arranged taxonomically but instead seemingly through a process of knolling. While this may not be intentional, the way in which modes of vernacular collecting and curating mimic the archive and the museum is worth considering here; the decorative and ‘satisfying’ arrangement of objects at right angles on a flat surface, with differing sizes, shapes and textures placed in proximity to create the illusion that they fit together.

Knolling can be seen purely as a form of consumerist pleasure, and this is one pertinent lens (or window) through which to view this vitrine in particular, and the vitrine as a mode of display in general. A reading that is reinforced by the artists’ use of souvenir formats in their newest work, informed by research residencies at Cardiff University’s Special Collections ● and The Sheffield General Cemetery ● site in Sharrow. However, such an analysis offers only one single route in and through the work of Heavy Water, and as their research methods and modes of display attest, this collective practice is better understood fractally. Each individual work can be read straightforwardly, but then also expands and deepens in its relation to the others, to the archive or site it stems from, and to its wider connotations within art and world history. This frisson is an essential part of Heavy Water’s work, with similarities or overarching narratives repeatedly undercut by the specificities of each artists’ practice. Dialogues

emerge in post-production and curation, and so here it seems that consumerism and desire are critiqued and scrutinised through the deployment of visual objects that arise directly from the activities of bourgeois leisure and travel, postcards and souvenirs. This reading may be convincing, but the postcard can also be a site in itself, and nothing about Heavy Water’s work is straightforwardly illustrative.

The Heavy Water vitrine is part of *PostNatures*, an exhibition at Sheffield’s Graves Gallery ● curated by Victoria Lucas, the curatorial lodestone of which is JWM Turner’s *The Festival upon the Opening of the Vintage of Macon* (c.1803), a landscape painting combining elements that would and could not appear in the same time or place in real life. Lucas’s work deals with how nature is constructed, and how the concept of nature in turn constructs our political and social imaginary, with a particular focus on how gender is produced, reinforced and can be

undermined through the self-representation of women within the landscape. As such, a clear challenge to the concept of objective reality is posed on the walls of the space, and then turning back into the world of the vitrine, archival images spanning several centuries of exploration, collecting and colonisation are recombined and recomposed in subtly different ways by Lucas, Maud Haya-Baviera and Joanna Whittle. These prints and collages constitute an illustration of how the character of each artist’s work interacts with and reinforces the others. In Whittle’s work the ludic persona of the trickster seems to dart and dash through the undergrowth, appearing in painted windows and then disappearing on second glance, telling tales embellished with details so seductive that their objective truthfulness is concealed, whereas Haya-Baviera’s focus on teasing out cultural understanding through documentation and correspondence brings to mind a science-fictional envoy, like Le Guin’s Genly Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) or more recently Mahit Dzmare in Arkady Martine’s *A Memory Called Empire* (2019); the imperfect and thus relatable character through whom we as the reader and viewer explore and become familiar with the world we are temporarily inhabiting. Lucas, then, makes a clear ethical argument with direct cuts, superimpositions and interventions into the canon through her curatorial handling of Sheffield’s collection, and the landscape itself with digital means.

These complementary modes each employ ‘fictioning’ as discussed in *Fiction as Method* (2017) eds. Jon K Shaw and Theo Reeves-Evison, identifying two strands of artistic storytelling:

‘those that reveal structures and gain agency in the construction of the everyday, and those that are deployed as holes to let in the “future” or “abstract-outside”’

As well as in the real-world display of the vitrine, the Heavy Water Collective presents their project via another type of ubiquitous screen on a deliberately designed website, wherein documentation of their growing body of work is found interspersed with each artist’s reflections on the collections and archives encountered. Offering a multitude of ways into and around each aspect of their artistic research and making, interdependent modes of fictioning assert themselves in how the same kernel is germinated variously by each artist. During *Material Rituals* at Sheffield General Cemetery ●, the interplay between how funerary ornaments embody wealth, social status and nationhood while simultaneously representing the most emotionally rich and fraught aspects of individual human existence is borne out in distinct approaches to ceramics. The ancient symbol of the ouroboros, found on the cemetery’s ‘Egyptian gate’, is brought forth in the vitrine as a weighty and monumental marker of our human frailty in the face of natural and planetary cycles in Lucas’s *Self Destructive Acts* (2023) ●, but also as a precious reminder of the ephemerality and continuity of human life in Haya Baviera’s *Child’s Bracelet in the Form of a Snake* (2023) ●. Fictioning is especially conspicuous in the descriptions of Whittle’s work given by the artist, where the apparent history and traditions of a community are relayed in snippets that belie attitudes and belief systems, in much the same way that these interpretive texts behave in ‘real’ museums. Whittle’s approach here opens up a space around the pragmatic ‘need’ for labelling, with details like ‘used in funerary practices between 24th January 1849 to 31st July 1915’ and ‘clay, metals, E903 and allotrope of carbon’ associated with *Immortelle Flare (Spiked)* (2023) ●, where extremely specific dates and chemical names are juxtaposed with approximate references.

The choice around which details to include here is reminiscent of the fictions we create to explain things like Mesolithic monuments, matching the prevailing ideologies and moralities of our times. Similarly, with the

supposedly ‘pagan’ symbols found intermingled with early Christianity in what has become the British Isles, a current example of which would be the inclusion of the ‘Green Man’ on Prince Charles’s coronation invitation. This symbol that is popularly referred to as ‘ancient’ was named relatively recently, along with the codification of many folk traditions within a certain aesthetic and towards a particular understanding of British identity. By so clearly and playfully fictioning within an active arena of debate, Whittle successfully upsets the fundamentally conservative impulse towards lineage and homeland. Indeed, each of the practices that go towards Heavy Water’s treatment of objects, texts and sites perform a destabilising manoeuvre, but without necessarily sacrificing the desire and wonder that attracts us towards the museum, the collection and the vitrine in the first place. In this way their work, particularly this display within its vitrine, can be understood within surrealist thought in its oscillation between aesthetic desire and the revolutionary impulse. In *Sculpture and the Vitrine* (2016) ed. John C Welchman, Dr. Marion Endt-Jones discusses glass as lens, barrier and window during the rise of the shopfront and arcade, with bourgeois consumerism as the mirror to surrealism’s attempts to invoke the unconscious. Here, the material of glass is identified as dialectical in itself, and moving beneath the lid of the vitrine for a moment, it is pertinent to apply this framework to the other material investigations undertaken by Heavy Water. For example, with Lucas’s *Witches Ladder* (2022) ● made from carved soap and knotted yarn, both materials having a purported ‘proper’ use, but here are being manipulated otherwise. Then, the buffed and layered surfaces of Whittle’s ritualistic objects, especially the ceramic items that are doubly removed from their apparent use, creating a legend and significance for these objects which are, along with many others in the vitrine, recently produced ceramic sculptures. Similarly, the postcard as both medium and message behaves dialectically, consider Haya-Baviera’s *Beyond the Woods* (2023) ●, where stills from a film work are frozen in the vitrine, in conjunction with Whittle’s *Postcard depicting Kippfigur with Hoop* (2022) ●.

The choice of a vitrine for an exhibition that seeks explicitly to move beyond questioning, in actively destabilising the ideological implications of the works selected, creates a parallel from our vantage point in ‘late capitalism’ with those surrealistic investigations from the birth of consumerism as we know it. Endt-Jones traces the ‘paradoxes of classification’ that haunt Western cultural history back to the 16th Century Wunderkammer, through natural history and its museological practices, to contemporary consumerism, noting how the pleasurable unease that emerges from that which defies categorisation is present in each era. A contemporary engagement with collections and archives is necessarily part of this lineage, and with Heavy Water the artists’ reciprocal approaches bring a vitality to their investigations, despite this weight of history. Without belabouring the correlation, there are numerous satisfying analogies in approaching Heavy Water’s art-research work through the winding corridors and foggy windows of surrealism, given that the movement was founded almost exactly a century ago. While they were responding and reacting to a new and thrilling proliferation of consumable objects, materials that can be manipulated and perform mimicry in previously unimaginable ways, and a desire to transgress and remake social norms, it now feels like we are gazing back over the wreckage. Since 1924 we have witnessed the rise and fall of materials as world-shaking and ubiquitous as plastic, which now drifts and settles in the deepest oceans, and are finally reckoning in the public sphere with the looting and destruction wrought by the British Empire.

From within this historical context, the careful, thoughtful and playful way that Heavy Water engage with the symbols, treasures and ephemera of our past cultivates a kind of webbed thinking. As Endt-Jones points out, a drive towards categorisation at the birth of natural history did not remove, but in fact heightened the desire for and curiosity about the marvellous and monstrous;

‘at certain moments in twentieth-century history and culture, the exotic, the strange, the rare, the fantastic and the grotesque were revived, signalling moments of transition and of intellectual and epistemological uncertainty’

...

‘curiosity and the marvellous emerge as concepts that allow us to question, reshuffle and redefine beliefs and attitudes.’

(ed. Welchman, 2016, p.98) Through this approach the inherently paradoxical nature of the material that Heavy Water deal with can be handled, both literally and figuratively. Histories and traditions that are harmlessly pleasurable from one perspective but clearly

exploitative and violent from another, or symbols and customs that have been invented and reinvented so many times that the question of their authenticity becomes ridiculous, are taken up in individual works but also through their mode of display.

‘The juxtaposition of a number of objects in the confined, sealed universe of the vitrine involves a heightened awareness of the mechanisms and criteria that lead to their selection and arrangement’

(ed. Welchman, 2016, p.97) and here they overlap and jostle with each other, seeming to shift between foreground and background, not least due to the digital ‘glitching’ employed in some individual works. This flickering between stillness and movement, history and future, the immovable landscape and teeming, squirming riverbank is where the unequivocally feminist revolutionary potential of this work can be located.

REFERENCES:

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POSTNATURES:

In the *PostNatures* exhibition at Graves Gallery, Sheffield, Heavy Water Collective present images and objects that respond to two very different archives — The Special Collections at Cardiff University ● and The Sheffield General Cemetery ● site in Sharrow — where they undertook research residencies in 2022. In this exhibition, the Heavy Water artists, Maud Haya-Baviera, Joanna Whittle and Victoria Lucas, select source material from these sites and use it to grapple with notions of the landscape in relation to embedded socio-cultural structures. Representations of landscapes correlate with tail eating snakes, female reproductive organs, plant matter, ritual objects and strange human forms. Myth and symbolism bleed into and out of the materiality of each object, creating a constellation of fluid and mystical associations. Alongside the display case, a printed schema draws together associations through fragmentary reference points.

The Heavy Water Collective (Maud Haya-Baviera, Victoria Lucas and Joanna Whittle) research archives and collections to create artworks that reclaim historical narratives, and provide alternative readings, in a contemporary context. Since the collective was formed in 2021, they have developed projects while undertaking various research residencies and exhibitions across the UK. Residencies include the Freelands Artists Programme, London; g39, Cardiff; Cardiff University Special Collections; Sheffield General Cemetery. Exhibitions include Heavy Water, at Site Gallery Sheffield in 2021, Aggregate, Freelands Foundation in 2022, and PostNatures, Grave Gallery in Sheffield in 2023. They have facilitated various events, including workshops and talks, as part of exhibition and visiting lecturer programmes.

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