

Even With Gauntlets

Some thoughts on Mamma Andersson's wood block prints

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Something glimmers and demands attention.

(The imagination is not obedient.)

In 1957, a partially destroyed group of sculptures representing the story of Homer's Ancient Greek Odyssey, is found in a cave on the coast near Rome at Sperlonga. The Roman Emperor Tiberius once owned a villa here: it was more than likely that it was he (or, at least, his lackeys) who placed the figures in the cave in order to dine amongst them. However, the cave collapsed in 26AD, and many of the sculptures were broken or crushed; they lay there for almost 2000 years. I picture them, a melancholy group, smashed up and covered with bat droppings, their once resplendent marble surfaces now mottled with salt.

(Who was it who said that a cave is like a mind?)

After they were discovered, the fragments were reassembled into what the Classicist Mary Beard has described as 'creative reinventions' of the originals.

To my mind, it's not unlike how history is written: memory, after all, is formed of fragments.

(Who among us hasn't, however inadvertently, creatively reinvented the past?)

These reassembled sculptures are, in a sense, like very real ghosts: time travellers not allowed to rest who, reborn, insist on disturbing the dreams of people who arrived on earth centuries after their supposed demise.

Mamma Andersson sees an image of these recreated sculptures. These shattered bodies intertwine in her imagination with pictures of gauntlets, a hare, a dress, a cat. She writes to me: 'I could see a sort of story. But I cannot explain what it's about.' She decides to create yet another version of the Sperlonga marbles, but this time in two-dimensions, not three (the possibilities of rebirth and invention are infinite.) Often, an idea – an image, a mood, a medium – sparks into life without the artist knowing exactly what might transpire. Perhaps art is simply another form of explanation.

Mamma Andersson transposes the sculptures from marble to wood block. Lines are created from a thick, oily ink and printed onto pages of delicate, handmade Japanese paper, each sized 57 x 48 cm. The artist likes this paper because, she tells me, of 'its special light, or shine'. The grain of the wood lends the prints a texture that cannot be replicated twice. Whereas marble is cool, smooth and reflective, wood is warm, rough and secretive.

(There is always somewhere to hide in a tree.)

In the same way that members of a family are closely related but individually distinctive, the resultant untitled prints are like twins or triplets: identical but different. Doubling – a kind of eternal return, perhaps? – is a recurring motif here: two pages, side-by-side. Repetition as a form of renewal.

Bodies are carriers of time; clothes are clues not only to dates but to personality. As if to repel the cold a naked Italian might feel if suddenly transported to Sweden, Mamma Andersson drapes her image of a naked man with a cloak, pulls stockings on his legs and places platform shoes on his bare feet. This poor ex-god has no head and is missing a hand, but his amputations do not appear to hold him back: he crackles with character and life (he's a statue on the move). Yet, within the repetition of gesture, in every iteration, his mood changes. It's like seeing someone at night and then again in the morning, when the intimacy of an evening – the alcohol and deep shadows, candle-light and whispered conversations – has been slept off. Some things can only happen when the moon is up and the stars are out; when the sun rises, light hits flesh and the atmosphere changes. Reality – or, at least, a different version of it – comes crashing in.

A white body is rendered brown; smooth skin is scarred and blackened in parts, like a tree that has survived a forest fire. The men in stockings are like overgrown schoolboys or long-dead dandies; others seemed to have escaped the city – they could be in the wild, fleeing an attack from some mythical beast. They move across a ground that shimmers like a whirlpool. Nothing is neat here. Nothing is clear. Nothing is stable – not even time.

(In others words, it's like life.)

These pictures are portraits of characters who will not be pinned down: fleet of foot, they move swiftly across centuries, indifferent to mortality and geography: they could be X-Rays of noble-men from the Renaissance or sculptural refugees from Ancient Greece or Rome or aliens from another planet, sent to Earth to imitate us. And yet, they also seem oddly contemporary.

(Are there gestures we use today that did not exist previously?)

Like their source – Greek sculptures of man-gods – these creatures are at once earthly and celestial, everyday and yet the stuff of legend. Is this man a statue with clothes? A ghost imitating a work of art? A false memory? A character from a fairy tale? Is the only thing that men ever change is their clothes?

A different angle: the man now is now seen from the side. All of his flesh, apart from a few fingers poking out from a lacy sleeve, is covered. A deep burgundy coat from what might be the late 18th century or so glows alongside a white ruffled shirt. The background is a deep moss-green: the colour of a gloomy forest or perhaps a fragment of faded velvet furniture in the crumbling home of an impoverished aristocrat. One moment, this man is on a plinth, the next he's floating, fading away; he's out of focus, textured or layered or caught at the moment of vanishing. At times, he's outlined in a soft, white mist – or perhaps what we're witnessing is something more violent – is he radioactive? It's a lush, incomplete evocation: like the dim recollection of someone you might have met once, long ago. You can't recall their features or the colours of their eyes but you've never forgotten the way they made you feel.

(Perhaps these are visions not from the past but the future?)

Mamma Andersson likes to work alone in her studio in her summer house in Gotland, a large island in the Baltic sea off the east coast of Sweden. I have never been there but I imagine it wind-whipped, isolated, its medieval town huddling tight against the incursions of the 21st century. It makes sense, then, that elements from northern Europe weave their way into this narrative from a grotto in southern Italy: a hare, a stag, a cat, a woman bent double working in a desolate field, a tree bowed but not broken, stark against the snow – or is it sand? Colours are as uneven as recollection, as faded as ageing photographs bleached by the sun.

(Have I mentioned that wood blocks owe their lives to trees?)

A blood-red pine stains a pale lemon sky; a grey-green version bleeds into an exhausted pink background; a mustard-coloured stag is camouflaged against a dirty pink canopy. This is landscape that makes you think of bodies in isolation, whatever the species: branches scratch like fingers at the air and the sky is as broody as a mare.

There is a hint of fairy tales here (and after all, what was Homer's *Odyssey* but a fairy tale on a grand scale?). An assumption hums that inanimate objects can spring to life, if need be; as

in the Greek myths, one thing can easily be transformed into another. In a series of multi-coloured prints, two sculptures of women – sisters, perhaps? – stand side by side. They are obviously from the ancient world: barefoot, dressed in togas and appear to be holding some kind of weapon. One of the women holds a hand to her heart, while the other gazes into the distance, her left hand-less arm raised. Their features are minimal yet somehow they express great charm: they seem strong, thoughtful, warm. They are apparitions; they are real.

In another image, a dress floats, disembodied, like the torso of an ancient sculpture. In one – the white dress decorated with two separate flower motifs – a pair of legs is very faintly delineated, but the body here plays second fiddle to the costume. The dress seems to breathe: there is flesh beneath this fabric.

Fingers and hands are recurring features: either their lack (the missing hand of the sculptures) or what they can do, if well protected. A series of images of a highly decorated pair of gauntlets – one pointing up (to heaven?), the other down (to hell?) – is a riot of texture: the swirled brocade of the wrist, the soft feather and fur of the edging, the creased leather of the finger. Some appear faded, useless – in one image, the gloves are almost obliterated by a grey stain – while another, rendered in a vivid burnt orange, is resplendent. Are these images of relics in a museum or still lives of garments still in use? What century are we even in? Is there a joke here, about throwing down the gauntlet?

(Perhaps these are the wrong questions.)

Time swirls around us. The world is as rich and as smashed up as a group of lost sculptures in a cave. It's important not to assume that the evolution of an image is ever straightforward. Time, it would seem, is not easily grasped – even with gauntlets.

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