

Claire Morgan - Loneliness and Communion

'All of my work is related to my own process of coming to terms with understanding our relations with animals.' (Claire Morgan, 2012)

Claire Morgan's monumental sculptures present an elusive alchemical blend of the loneliness of artifice together with the promise of new forms of communion with animal life. They respond in a lucidly affective way to environmental catastrophe by aesthetically reconfiguring the relationship between our bodies, culture, animality and natural environment. Their sensuous power and imperious stillness are full of hidden meanings and mysterious forgotten voices. The spectator is immediately overwhelmed by their precision and delicate material grandeur. Yet, with time they begin to signal beyond the affectivity of their immediate presence towards a disturbing sense of loss and an enduring absence that is both strange and familiar. This sense of absence beckons us towards a half-remembered enigma hidden within the everyday. This is the enigma of shared animality that we have progressively hidden from ourselves and have almost forgotten. Despite our amnesia, Morgan's work speaks with a recognizably vibrant and intense animal poetry, calling us back to a vital element of ourselves we have almost lost.

By weaving viscerally affective material and conceptual cultural associations, Morgan conveys a complex assemblage of tensions in her work. Together with the tension between inorganic artifice and animality, other types of familiar opposition are discernible - life/death; stillness/movement; chaos/control. The presence of bluebottles in many of the pieces inevitably suggest the organic processes associated with death and decay (*On Top of the World* (2009), *Foreign Body* (2010) & *Little Death* (2013)). By feeding on decomposing organic material, flies are agents of change, metamorphic creatures, evoking the life cycle of the egg, maggot, larvae and fly. However, in Morgan's work they move beyond this role, as she arrests the most basic transformative process in order to nullify the fly's role in the perpetual process of birth, reproduction and death. In a similar way, she interrupts the process of aerial germination and fertilization by suspending seeds and leaves as they fall to the ground (*Fall Out* (2010) & *Pedestal* (2011)). Stillness becomes absolute, a zero point of death. Apart from flies and seeds, she makes use of inorganic plastics in the shape of torn polythene fragments (*The Grass is Always Greener* (2010) & *Interference (II)* (2010)). Such inorganic detritus alludes to an absolute cessation of the natural organic cycle through its inherent resistance to biodegrading.

Then there are the taxidermic animals. These are almost always familiar threshold creatures that have come to share our human space, both in rural and urban environments. Nocturnal, subterranean or aerial, these are all animals that dwell, often invisibly, at a liminal point of contact with humans - foxes, owls, rabbits, hares, mice, hedgehogs, herons, ducks, gulls, rooks and butterflies. Transfigured animal familiars. The effect of placing these creatures into direct proximity with the frozen and airless geometry of absolute death, such as the crashed tawny owl in *Captive* (2008), is to create an experience of almost intangible natural disaster.

The ongoing artifice of our human culture is signified through the choice and application of elaborate geometrical forms, the intimate way that natural organic material is handled and treated by the artist (for example, the unbearable intimacy of *Gone to Seed* (2011)), through to the playfully suggestive titles given to the sculptures (such as *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (2008), *Fantastic Mr Fox* (2008), *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (2008) & *You Are My Sunshine* (2012)). These popular cultural allusions allow us to more easily project

ourselves back into the complex spaces opened up by the work, and to begin the process of contemplating our own visceral humanity and its own place within the realm of animality.

In the tranquility of works such as *Still. Moving* (2010) it is as if Morgan has somehow managed to capture organic substances in the process of autonomously tracing out an imponderably delicate intervention into Brownian Motion. Whether with seeds, leaves, polythene or bluebottle flies, she preserves a moment of impossible geometrical beauty as if they were delicate particles caught and rendered motionless in a momentary shaft of sunlight. As the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius observed, this slow dance of particles indicates the presence of a vast hidden realm of underlying movements of matter hidden from our sight. Such movements gradually build up until they emerge at the level of our senses. The work transports us several steps back from visibility into a poetic realm of hidden life where impossible collisions can occur. Strange sculptural geometry suspends the ordinary forces of gravity and the chaotic processes of change. Yet, holding them in abeyance further exacerbates their presence, and it is into such intensively charged spaces that animals come into a new form of visibility.

It is possible to see a number of gestural movements at play in the work, the first being *contact* and *rest*. Taxidermic animals are frozen in time as if under the magical spell of the white witch in the endless winter of Narnia. By coming into contact with the strange demarcated zones composed of seeds, polythene or flies the animals suddenly become lifeless, weightless and immobile. At these boundaries they are held back from any further organic development, degradation and corruption. The globes, cubes and rectangular prisms represent a sudden equilibrium in the ceaseless change of life. In each of these works it is as if we have become witnesses to the day the earth stood still. The magpie in *Still. Moving* (2010) rests immobile beneath the dense canopy of torn black polythene, and the hedgehog in *Clearing* (2009) appears frozen at the edge of a suspended cube of black polythene fragments that appears to have fallen to earth. In *While You Were Sleeping* (2009) a dormant red squirrel rests in mid-air upon a thick rectangular bed of suspended bluebottles, as if being carried away to another world. In *Little Death* (2013) - a diminutive blue tit rests lifeless upon a supernaturally dense plinth of dead bluebottles. A similar memorializing act of contrition occurs in *Pedestal* (2011) where the lifeless body of a heron is held aloft by a tower of suspended dandelion seeds. In all of these works Morgan restores lift to creatures overcome by the fatal burden of contact - gentle restorative acts in response to disaster.

Whilst many of her sculptures convey delicate moments of contact and states of rest, for other works it is the disastrous *movement* and *fall* of the animals prior to their eventual petrification that is dramatically figured, no more so than in the installation *Here is the End of All Things* (2011). In this work four separate cubes (three composed of thistle seeds and one of bluebottles) are suspended in a line. The flight of a barn owl is traced by the hollow path of its bursting through two of the seed cubes, its progress impeded by the third cube where it now appears forever suspended, wings outstretched, never to move any further. A similar movement is traced in *Gone with the Wind* (2008) where the final arrested flight of a kittiwake gull is traced through a vast suspended structure of wildflower seeds. Again, in *Ophelia (Wake)* (2009) a lifeless water bird has drifted away from its own element and become trapped in a dense lake of suspended fragments of torn polythene, its path to doom etched through this plastic detritus. In *Fall Out* (2010) three canaries are frozen mid-descent as they exit beneath the half dome of leaves. Similarly in *Captive* (2008) there is another cataclysmic fall (which ends in a head-on collision with the earth) perpetrated by a tawny owl - a sudden hyperbolic charge of gravity or catastrophic subtraction of air, rendering it too heavy to be able to support itself on the wing.

Finally there are those works, more prevalent of late, in which the dynamic is one of mortal *capture* and *confinement*. The sheer panic of a struggle occurs, a frenetic effort at escape. The two squirrels in *The Grass is Always Greener* (2010) are hopelessly lost and trapped within a miasma of torn plastic detritus. Not only are they separated from their own element, they have also become separated from each other. From out of their artificial cages, they stare at one another across an unbreachable gulf, doomed in their unnatural loneliness. In *Throe* (2010), two rooks in the midst of their own conflict are oblivious to their fatal confinement within an enormous globe of thistle seeds. Again, in *Inteference (II)* a lone, and almost hidden, carrion crow is suspended and confined in a dense flurry of torn plastic fragments. Whilst these works explicitly present a suffocating drama of capture and confinement, each of the dynamics in Morgan's other work, whether it is contact, rest, movement or fall, reduce to a form of collective confinement. Regardless of whether it is through a subtraction of gravity, its sudden fatal intensification, immersion in a vacuum, or a hermetic sealing up within the inorganic materiality of an impossible geometry, each sculpture dramatizes a moment of catastrophic confrontation between radically different forces, between the crushing artifice of the human world and the forces of nature. Nature is repeatedly displayed as overcome, overwhelmed, suffocated, and nullified. Each sculpture enacts calmly violent extractions upon the taxidermic animals, displacing them into artificial milieus where they appear fatally abstracted from the flow of life. Here the disaster is naked, our destructive species-loneliness laid bare.

Morgan's art intends to restore the implicit vibrancy to nature that is being so systematically subtracted from it by human culture. Providing we are sensitively calibrated, at the simplest level her sculptures exist in order to intensify our overall sense of life and the damage we have done, and continue to do. This is achieved by a delicate aesthetic stillness. Together with testifying to the immediacy of an existential disaster, there is also an expression of existential renewal - the most fragile hope imaginable for a different kind of future being injected into the present. This is work that extends a welcoming vision, reaches out towards nature as a form of supplication, and provides an opportunity to construct new alliances with the liminal spaces that animals share with our world. An instant of contact is repeatedly configured in which a new form of relation becomes visible - a relation based on shared breath. By virtue of the catastrophe the work presents an intense and original view of life. At once, it expresses the petrified lifelessness of death associated with the disaster as well as the constrained virtual energy of life. It initiates a process of overcoming our deep loneliness by producing a new form of communion with the animal - unsentimental, apologetic and generous. We have turned away from such forms of collective communion with animality - both from the animals *we are* as well as the ones *they are*. When we are this solipsistically lonely it is as if the world has become totally lost to us, we exist as spectral parasites on the surface of an airless alien planet. Morgan's sculptural communions are part of an effort at ecological restoration enacted through expressive aesthetic acts rather than intellectual or political ones. The sculptures are acts of contrition which should inspire us to rethink of animal communion as an alliance, as a new kind of kinship. They revive a sense of our shared substance, space and breath.