

BLACK PALM







On one illuminated page of Splendor Solis, the sixteenth-century alchemical treatise from which the title of Douglas White's exhibition derives, The Red Sun rises over a dark hilltop city. Its human features – lips pursed, eyebrows pressed into a frown – express apprehension that one would not normally associate with Saint Barthélemy: the Caribbean island, host to the artist during his residency, is much sooner connected with luxurious carefree days.

The works exhibited here: Gorilla, Black Palm, Octopus and Lichtenberg Drawings, are not carefree like their setting, however. Their beauty and accomplished craftsmanship belies similar tensions as those found in the miniature in which The Red Sun appears. The eyes of the latter, looking beyond the grey-black buildings in the background, avert themselves from an architectural intrusion it seems they would rather not see. Urban landscape gives way to trees, a single cluster of houses yields to a foreground of truncated trees and fields. It is in settings like these that the artist recuperates his objects - stumps of tree ferns filled with water so black it resembles oil. Or, on the Côte Sauvage of Saint Barth, finding a dead cactus on the path; collecting the pieces and carrying it home.

Dried out husks of cactus tree are the foundations of Gorilla, a new work shown for the first time at Eden Rock. Animal and plant are one in this carefully crafted primate's head, almost at the material's insistence: when the first parts of the cactus tree die, they begin to rot in reaction to the moisture still trapped inside the plant. Simultaneously, water closer to the surface of the cactus evaporates, leaving a halfdecayed structure. The 'skin' of the cactus dries out under the sun, meanwhile. The remains: an extremely thin and delicate papery layer. Too fragile to use in this form, Gorilla came about when Douglas managed to reinforce the 'skin':

'Earlier this year I wanted to try casting a piece of cactus in bronze. The first stage was to dip it in wax and I guess this is where the new work started: I saw how strong the wax could make the delicate cactus, even the skin layer. It penetrates it, but also transforms it a bit. It becomes leathery, and really just like the hands of an ape. Even if you haven't seen an ape up close, I think we all know that strange black leathery skin'

The cactus skin had need of strength, as did the artist to make this work: Gorilla is the first sculpture Douglas has made following a difficult hiatus in his practice - a sudden personal loss made it near impossible to work. Previously, the mere thought of Gorilla was an embarrassment: the artist pictured the animal beating its huge fists on the ground and it too closely mimicked his anger. At first a horrific symbol of confused aggression that could not be realised, eventually Gorilla became the means, once a shift in circumstance and emotions allowed, for the artist to dispel some of his pain. The reversal of mood required to work on Gorilla is to some extent echoed in a



reversal of the alchemical tradition by which Douglas is inspired. The art of alchemy normally prizes precious metals most highly but Gorilla emerges from a revision: rather than bronze, the substance preferred is the lowlier one of wax, chosen as a way to preserve rather than convert some of the original qualities of a natural resource. As soon as Douglas saw the skin transformed in the greenish casting material, the cactus had become ape. He had collected and sent back to the UK boxes upon boxes of this dead cactus: ‘hundreds of pieces from big hunks of the stuff to tiny pieces’. Amongst all this, the artist recalls how one small piece looked for all the world like the nose of a gorilla. And this became the literal centre of the work:

‘From this beginning, it became a case of searching through the fragments to construct the rest: an eye here, a brow there, protruding lips and sloping forehead. What is vital, is that the viewer sees the insides, the construction, the cobbling together. Made from approximately ten pieces, it is a strange kind of jigsaw’

Douglas has described the face of Gorilla as an ‘almost wearable’ mask, suggesting a desire to inhabit the animal’s skin. It would not be the first time that the draw of a material trapped somewhere between life and death has been so strongly felt. New Skin for an Old Ceremony was an exhibition that returned to a compulsive reaction felt as a child, holidaying in Africa with his mother, for the remains of an elephant encountered as landscape; all the flesh was scavenged, just the skin spread over the ground.

Artist and animal are entangled in Douglas White’s work. Whether gorilla, elephant or octopus, they appear as ‘companion species’ to their maker, the term coined by Donna Haraway to describe those beings that ‘constitute each other and themselves’ through ‘their reaching into each other, through their “prehensions” or graspings’. If elsewhere Haraway writes that ‘explanations of primate, and especially hominid, evolution might be the most notorious cock-fighting arena in contemporary life sciences’, in Douglas’ work we encounter human and nonhuman animals including the ape, coming into being at the same time. The works assembled in Splendor Solis may be seen as examples of ‘naturecultures’; ‘layers of history, layers of biology’.

‘How far apart are humans from animals?’ is the question posed by Vilém Flusser’s theoretical fable Vampyreoteuthis Infernalis. In this eccentric work we find an evolutionary sketch:

‘After a period of climatic cooling, resulting in a scarcity of trees, primates were no longer situated in the treetops but rather in the open spaces of extensive plains. Instead of leaves, their eyes beheld horizons; instead of birds’ nests, their fingers met with the stones that were lying around them.

In this strange world, in which they themselves were strange, primates attempted to overcome their alienation. The horizons came to be seen, and the stones to be held, as a means of overcoming. This is how humans originated'

While contradicting notions of coevolution, Flusser's allusion to stones seems to posit the found object, so important in Douglas' work, as the thing that knits together human and other animals. In a talk given in 2013, the artist suggested that, as for Flusser's primate, the found object has been for him a means of overcoming. Quoting Ted Hughes on the poem as confession; 'a revealing of something that the writer doesn't actually want to say, but desperately needs to communicate, to be delivered of (...) smuggled through analogies', Douglas said that 'objects are a slightly bizarre form of communication, a conversation I'm having simultaneously with the world at large and with myself'.

This object-conversation can be dark, and it is sombreness that Octopus Drawings communicate, too. Featuring in Splendor Solis as prints of octopus made with its own black ink, one can imagine them sharing the seascape of the squid that Flusser describes elsewhere in his thesis. The cephalopod is 'not entirely alien to us', Flusser writes; one principal difference lies in its existence in eternal darkness at the bottom of the sea:

'What we see is not the world itself but the reflection of sunlight off of things (...) We have to penetrate behind appearances in order to free things from the veil of light (...) The world of the vampyroteuthis, in comparison, does not appear - it is dark (...) Not of wakeful reason, the vampyroteuthic world is rather one of dreams'

It was in a similarly dark context that Douglas laid hands on his first found object: aged five or six, he ventured down into the cellar of a family home recently troubled by parental separation and emerged with a twig resembling a drowning man clinging to a log - a mysterious totem presenting in the same instant threat and saviour by nature. Douglas' work thrives on such unresolved psychological meanings and contradictions, perhaps nowhere better than in Black Sun, a single tyre bursting into branches.

What if one imagines Black Sun, iconic symbol of melancholia, as the negative of the sun that shines on Saint-Barth? And Black Palm a shadowy counterpart to the vital green trees that populate the island. The latter, made from rubber tyres found on the roadside, frayed, and built into towering trunk and generous canopy, fits so perfectly among the many palms defining our setting that a bird chose it as her nesting place and her young hatched in the interim between the artist's residency and his show.

New life from burnt out rubber. With his latest palm, Douglas has drawn together nature and industrial detritus in keeping with a practice that has always denied clear-cut distinctions between organic and inorganic matter, nature and culture. Elsewhere, in a series of Lichtenberg Drawings, lightning has been artificially created with a machine that runs electric currents through wood. In Black Palm, the artist engages in a form of backwards manufacturing, finding rubber remarkably well suited to recreating the hessian-like surface of palm trunks. Extraordinarily, the raw milky matter factoring in tyre production is echoed in the nesting bird's regurgitation to feed her young.

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