

Gilgamesh and the Uncanny

In the story *Hansel and Gretel*, first published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812; a woodcutter and his wife fall on such hard times that the children's mother suggests that their father take the children into the forest and abandon them there.

The plot is so familiar that it almost seems to approach the collective unconscious. Overhearing their parents' conversation, the children leave a trail of bread-crumbs to find their way home. But the birds of the forest eat the crumbs and the children are irretrievably lost in the dark wood. They wander tired, cold and frightened, until they happen upon a wonderful sight, a house made of gingerbread! Alas the house is a trap to lure hungry children set by a cannibalistic witch who plans to eat them! The children are captured, but being resourceful, escape and return to their father with the witch's wealth. By now, their mother has died and so they all live happily ever after.

There is a brutal tangle of metaphor and allegory caught up in this fairy-tale. Evidently misogynistic, it makes uncomfortable connections between hunger and cannibalism motherhood and witchcraft - the concurrent death of mother and witch suggesting that they are, in fact, the same person. But more than this, there is the metaphor of the forest itself. The forest is somewhere to lose oneself, somewhere familiar yet unknowable, alien, *unheimlich*. It seems prescient that a house is placed in the middle of the forest in the Grimm story, in as much as it anticipates Freud's *uncanny* by a century, the gingerbread house being an almost perfect distillation of the un-home-ly.

It is some of the tension and anxiety of the uncanny that Anita Groener has engaged in her recent installation *Gilgamesh* comprising of two large wall-drawings *After Casper David Friedrich - Le Chasseur dans la Forêt* and *Billow* In the first work *After Casper David Friedrich* Groener has rendered a line drawing of the trees, from the eponymous Friedrich painting. It is perhaps co-incidental that the works by Friedrich and Grimm are exactly contemporary (1812 and 1813), but one does offer a reading of the other – the Brothers Grimm reminding us that our twenty-first-century notions of Romanticism need to be tempered with reality – starvation and abandonment being the uneasy bedfellows of beauty and the sublime.

The forest, however, is not just a nineteenth-century pre-occupation. Despite the technological advances made by Western civilization, the forest remains other-worldly. In pop culture the forest seems to behave in varied ways. For example, in the movies, *Into the Wild* and *Grizzly Man*, men with clearly romantic, almost Rousseauian outlooks,

are inevitably consumed by that nature with which they wished to commune. On the other hand are those movies, particularly within the horror genre, that pit man against nature. Much of the horror in a film such as *The Blair Witch Project* derives from a failure of technology, a torch's batteries dying heralding a descent into primeval darkness, a place in which the forest returns to an unknowable place of fear and danger. The forest becomes that place onto which civilization projects its innermost anxieties, a condensation of nature vs. culture and man's hubris in the face of nature.

Like the failing light in the forest, in Groener's work, an analogous evisceration takes place. We see an emptying-out of narrative, of painting, of art history, of the self – and all executed with a certain violence – an unflinching mind and cold hand combining to silence the story emerging from the picture plane. This is something of a paradox as the title of the exhibition draws on the history of storytelling. *Gilgamesh* refers to one of the earliest stories ever recorded, that of Gilgamesh, a great and brutal king born of the goddess Ninsun of ancient Mesopotamia, it is an epic narrative of heroic deeds, gods and goddesses. Groener's title suggests the viewer might seek an illustrated account of these events in the works presented, but it soon becomes clear that the title is, in some ways, a decoy or trap, a gingerbread-house of sorts.

Groener's rendering of Friedrich's painting has removed all human presence. She has subverted Friedrich's pantheist *Naturphilosophie*, which sought to spiritually connect nature and culture; nature is no longer subject to man's (or God's) lawgiving, but it reasserts its other-ness, its own unique power and timelessness. It is useful to read this assertion as cultural metaphor. Just as art has, over the past decades, shaken off the shackles of easy interpretation – contemporary artists like Groener explore different territories and map them in new ways.

This is borne out by the second and larger wall-drawing entitled *Billow*, it is executed in black pigment and forming an oval shape reminiscent of a finger-print, with concentric, biomorphic lines. A sense of balance and equilibrium exists between these apparently differing wall-drawings. While *After Casper David Friedrich - Le Chasseur dans la Forêt* appears to be based on a prior narrative of which *Billow* appears devoid, it becomes clear that the artist is actually pointing to their shared object-ness. As one's eye settles over the scenes presented, the regularity, symmetry and evenness of the marks assert themselves; the figuration falls away as the patterns affirm their presence.

It is somewhat inevitable that a wall-drawing should come to be read as anti-narrative. Informed by the practices of Sol LeWitt or the reductivist Niele Toroni, these artists

insist on the materiality of their medium and the extent to which it must remain 'visible and legible' (Toroni). Groener has certainly adopted this classical Conceptual position but only, it seems, as another device with which to render a contemporary viewpoint. Metaphorically, her intention comes in and out of focus; as with Pointillism, the reading of the work depends on the viewer's position – stand too close and one only sees a group of dots, stand back a few paces and the figuration reasserts itself. It is a confounding experience, an apparently simple statement reveals itself as complex and elaborate. It is here that Groener's use of the forest-as-metaphor enters a clearing. In as much as art made today is informed by post-structuralism – that, in itself, obfuscates rather than enlightens the path towards understanding – the multiple voices implicit in every act and action blur the space between viewer and object. But there is a shift as we again see Groener's reiteration of the mark, the mark being the thing – *das Ding*.

Groener's marks, when read through Freudian or Lacanian systems, can be seen to exist either outside language and the unconscious (*das ding*), or as representations which form part of the symbolic order (*die Sache*). This is helpful in as much as it creates a structure within which the constant shifts in Groener's imagery can be qualified. When we read *Billow* as an abstract drawing, or a gathering of marks, it functions comfortably within an art-historical trajectory. But if we shift our consciousness slightly, *Billow* becomes distinctly figurative, like Hitchcock's *The Birds*, a representation of the unmanageable and untamed aspects of the unconscious mind. When we examine some of the collective nouns for birds in the English language, their potential for psychoanalytic exploitation seems even more potent: a siege of bitterns, a murder of crows, an unkindness of ravens. In the specific context of Hitchcock's movie, various themes about the mother/daughter relationship; bourgeois culturisation; and nature vs. culture – seem to resonate with Groener's prior and current interests.

It is here that Groener's appropriation of *Gilgamesh* to title her drawing installation settles into place. Storytelling, with its characteristics of interpersonal communication, embroidery of language, improvisation and adaptation, and most importantly, universality, fits the works in this exhibition in telling ways. By means of its sheer mutability, it communicates numerous sensations and polarities: figuration vs. abstraction, narrative vs. formalism, esoteric vs. exoteric. It is this mutability that can be seen as Groener's focus in her search for visual narratives without a story.

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