

Kapos, Martha
"Dead Things Talk"
Draw.
2007, pp. 148-149.

LUHRING
AUGUSTINE

531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com

Dead Things Talk

I
Once upon a time...
There was a King!
No, my children, you are wrong. Once upon a time there was a piece of wood.

Carlo Collodi: *The Adventures of Pinocchio*

Once upon a time in the Kingdom of Bang and Blab, what was called an art object had become a debased understanding of a magic object, and art had to be invented all over again. It began with substances such as wood, stone, felt, fat, and blood: materials which were valued because, in their raw state, they were culturally pristine and uncorrupted by aesthetic convention. They offered themselves simply as examples of the healing wisdom and creativity of the artist. Joseph Beuys, like the orphic poet who allowed the voices of inanimate nature, of trees and rocks and stones, to speak through him, was a vehicle for the oracular language of things.

Drawing was the rag and bone shop where the Shaman made his first *material moves* with the fundamental action of placing matter on a ground. Beuys' pencil drawings gave the impression of being almost unwilling – even untouched by the human hand. Their spidery lines seemed to float with a waywardness and unpredictability which was often extremely beautiful. But their aesthetic qualities notwithstanding, the fact that the drawings might be works of art in a conventional sense was not part of the story.

II
How it happened that a carpenter found a piece of wood that laughed and cried like a little boy.

Carlo Collodi: *The Adventures of Pinocchio*

The storytellers of Majorca begin their traditional tales with the preamble: 'It was and it was not'. Whereas 'Once upon a time' invites the reader to return to a period of misty primordial beginnings, 'It was and it was not' openly declares that the following story is going to be an interplay of actuality and fiction. It will involve belief and disbelief held in suspension, and entertained at the same time.

For all its emphasis on materials, David Musgrave's work stands at some distance from Beuys' in a number of respects. Nostalgia for an art of archaic or authentic origins is not part of his project; nor does he share Beuys' wish to uncouple 'real' materials from the aesthetic conventions that make them into a work. 'Conventions of making and reading', he says, 'always precede the act... At the same time... I tend to take these conventions as the subject of the work, to try to step outside or defeat them in some way.' At first sight *Golem* (1999) appears to be casually formed from overlapping strips of tan-coloured masking tape applied to a wall.

“Dead Things Talk”
Draw. pp. 148-149.

531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com

But rather like the foolish birds in the myth of Zeuxis who were tricked into pecking at painted grapes, we are forced into an inevitable double-take: the *Golem* is actually made of paint in an illusionistic likeness of masking tape. The fact that our credulity has been trifled with might easily give rise to boredom – were it not for the Golem. Musgrave has made the Golem arise from the materials of his making in a distinctive way. Illusionistic conventions for representation have always functioned as signs for the depiction of an imagined world. But here they have been turned in their pigeonholes to apply to the ‘real’ particulars of a material. It is because these separate contrasts have become so firmly entrenched – on the one side, denotation, and on the other, the qualities specific to materials – that Musgrave seems to present a disjunction of registers. It is as if the opposing ranks shot with each other’s guns.

The importance of this lies in the fact that the play of illusion and material has the effect of annihilating both as practical entities. The stuff from which the Golem is made is now nothing that we can confidently know. In a magic or a playful mood the Golem steps forward from this hall of mirrors. Musgrave has transformed a merely ambiguous object into an uncanny work of fiction which stands outside the comfortable categories of both ‘illusion’ and the ‘real’. The *Television drawings* (2006) shown here are reincarnations of the *Golem*.

In other drawings Musgrave has shown an astonishing mastery of the *trompe l’oeil* conventions for achieving a likeness. But, in a contradictory way, a scrunched up piece of Cellophane (*Transparent head*, graphite on paper 2003), torn scraps of paper, a dried and broken leaf, paint drips on a board, which have been the subjects Musgrave has chosen to draw, offer no firm criteria for likeness in themselves. (After all, what does a piece of Cellophane look like?) Yet the subtle and diverse details of drawing – shifts of line, light and shade stipulating each change of direction taken by a form – present a swelling mass of information. But with a curious result: statements of drawing, which seem to be representational, are revealed to be totally enigmatic in themselves and incapable of imitating a single fold or shadow, or, in fact, any ‘real’ object at all. In the indeterminacy of these images, the conventions of *trompe l’oeil* subvert their own content and, resisting likeness, collude with their opposite – becoming something like abstraction.

As the marks hover together on the surface of the paper, they become subjected to a particular kind of contemplation: what Valery called ‘the speculative life of vision’ⁱ. Both the object and the conventions for its representation acquire a kind of ‘plasmic softness’ⁱⁱ ready to receive a new thought from outside the drawing’s ostensible aim. We begin to see the drawing, not as a terminal point for recognition – the drawing of a piece of Cellophane – but as a point of departure for a new material sign: a new object, the Golem Head. The latent figuration within the amoeba-like flow of the drawing medium lies waiting to be captured. And the Golem, true to his name, makes his appearance, rather shockingly, as if the artist wasn’t looking, or from a blind spot within his conscious intention. It also seems to come almost at the helpless bidding of the viewer, from his own anthropomorphic impulse: from the viewer’s own desire to see a figure.

In the *Television drawings* (2006) Musgrave appropriates a representational convention entirely at odds with the drawing of images. Televisions tend to work on digital principles now, but on the original TV screens, to which these drawings refer, a luminous dot, beneath the threshold of vision, ‘draws’ a picture by traversing it from side to side 405 times in one fifth of a second. Musgrave’s pencil follows a strictly horizontal grid which fills the space in imitation of the mode (though not the speed) of an electronic signal.

In this way the Golem appears by means of a perversion of draughtsmanship – only as a sequence of interruptions which change the tonal intensity of the straight lines as they strike a brighter or a darker form. The line is entirely oblivious of contour, perspective, foreground or background. It follows none of the conventional strategies for drawing, nor any of the forms of conceptualisation or intention that belong to depiction. There is no gestural turning of the pencil in favour of the articulation of a form. But instead, the little Golem looms before us embedded inside the material of his making – a complex symbol combining the elements of representation with the medium of drawing in a new way.

Martha Kapos

ⁱ Paul Valery, *Ecrits sur L’Art*, Paris 1960. p.146

ⁱⁱ Jose Ortega Y Gasset, *Phenomenology and Art*, NY 1975, p.143