

In one of the more famous interludes in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein invites readers to imagine that everyone has a small box, in which they keep a beetle. Unfortunately, whilst we are able to examine our own beetles, as well as being able to describe our beetles to other people, we are not unable to show our beetle to anyone else, nor are we able to look inside anyone else's box. We find ourselves at the outer limits of language: although we might use the same words to describe our respective beetles, there is no means of guaranteeing that we are actually describing the same thing.

Looking at the works comprising Mary Teague's latest solo show, *All my luxuries have turned to misery*, I found myself thinking of Wittgenstein's beetle and the difficulties inherent in saying what we mean. The problem, of course, is posed in spite of the obvious differences between art and language: whilst art is a means of transporting semantic baggage over the harsh and unforgiving terrain of lived experience, it does so without the benefit of the strict systems of denotation and connotation that characterise verbal and written communication.

Teague, for her part, seems keenly and profoundly aware of the incommensurability of language and art. Peppered with sentimental keepsakes of a past that we neither share nor recognise, *All my luxuries have turned to misery* presents a mélange of palimpsests and broken images: abstracted icons produced in thick layers of encaustic (*All my luxuries have turned to misery #1*); grim wedding snaps from parties to which none of us were invited (*All my luxuries have turned to misery #2*); digital scans of found objects and images (*Equivalence, His and hers*); a coffee table, rendered in ice, quietly melting on a carpeted floor (*Support (Mario Bellini)*). Circles and pools and lemniscates recur throughout: wedding rings, bird-filled ponds (*Cygnets*), smutty cantaloupes (*Melons*), round tables and coins and mirrors and seated children (*Singalong*). Everything is attenuated and infinitely lonely, with broken frames or open borders; two or three or four steps removed from the conditions that brought them into being.

There is strangeness in this loneliness. Even inert, there is a sense that, beneath whatever material constitutes the item in question, yawns something vast and melancholy demanding to be expressed. The items want to be touched, to be held, to be understood; nonetheless, they seem to understand that communion is impossible. Lost in history, doomed to stupor and forlornness, Teague's objects long for a language, for a means of expression that is more than just melodramatic gesticulations and invocations; they long for a point of contact with the world. Teague's performance piece, *Carl and Caitlin with invisible Donald Judd Bed #32*, gestures to this desire. The eponymous Carl and Caitlin—accompanied by a bed that is present but not extant—talk *at* one another; acting only to internal scripts, they say pretty words but do not speak.

Unfortunately, without even the awkward, imperfect machinery of language at

their disposal, the glittering profundities that lie at the depths of these objects look only like the cheapest paste. However, whilst acknowledging this state of affairs, Teague does not think that we succumb to the temptations of the linguistic turn; that way lays madness. Although attempts have been made to either claim that art is a language, or that art should be made a language, she clearly disputes the validity of either venture. Indeed, by means of her broken and sentimental ecology of references, Teague seems to categorically deny even the possibility of a language of art; that is to say, were art to become a language, it would cease to be art at all. Although the emotionality of art finds its limits in melodrama, saving art does not lie in reducing the practice to semiotics.

Teague knows, just as Wittgenstein knew, that not even language is a guarantee that you'll be understood. This is an integral part of the human condition; an inability to share beetles is an inescapable feature of our existential lot. The fine gradations of emotion that we experience are effaced by the crudeness of our forms of expression. Our words are imperfect containers for expressing our internal states; fit to overflowing, we must make do with vessels that are shared, unwashed, riddled with holes. It is an unenviable situation, made worse by the fact that we cannot abandon our language, any more than we can abandon the forms of life that have led us to this point.

After all, what other choices do we have?

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