

Walter May: After the Rapture

[“Walter May: After the Rapture.” *Walter May: Look Again*. Nickle Galleries. University of Calgary. 2018. 52.]

Walter May forages for meaning in the detritus of a society he has fallen into but only reluctantly belongs. He is a witness sifting through refuse for fragments to be cobbled into tactile poetry. Once narratives have been discredited, become confused, or lost, the only reliable thing is the silent testimony of the hand made. May crafts enigmatic hybrids, melancholic comic representatives of the human condition with the sincerity of the last sculptor on earth. He fashions solace for survivors.

Often combining natural and manufactured found objects—repurposed furniture, tools, industrial cast-offs, tree trunks and branches—May’s unique forms seem to have a purpose, intent, even an animate being that exceeds the mere real things from which they emerge. “Trailer” (2011) is just a burnt poplar branch attached to a stout steel pressure tank. But the alchemy of the imagination transforms these two disparate things into a singular new being, perhaps a sprouting seed. “Plugged” (2010) and “Pin Pine” (2007/8) return wooden handles to the trees from which they came. The gestures might remind us that our civilization emerges from nature but has become alienated from it. The attempted return and repair is suffused with a comic pathos. The grafts do not mend the rift between nature and culture but embody the suspense that is our human nature.

Like the truth-to-materials generation he succeeds, May generally lets his materials be themselves. He chooses objects not only for their intriguing shapes but also for their natural or worn patinas. When he decorates, it is with fire. While a formalist at heart, his found things resist becoming mere compositional elements and he allows their histories and personalities to murmur. His formalist good taste is leavened by surreal humour.

When an artist tries a new art form they tend to carry from their preferred medium themes, style and sensibility that can shed light on the darker corners of their primary work. “Duets” is a series of paired photographs printed this year but taken at various times over the past fifteen. If May’s sculptures evoke the body, demand touch, these photographs compose a world without people. A witness traverses the scene like the recording angels in Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire*. The gaze searches for accidental wit, subtle visual pleasures and mute truths. One image shows a bird bath, the next a mud puddle. Two pigeons on a wire; a fallen comrade in the snow in the next image? I saw this. That happened. Isn’t this odd, interesting, unexpectedly beautiful? May’s photographs filter out people because they are self-deceptive. Perhaps more telling truths can be found in their traces. Perhaps you can learn more about the essence of a person by rooting through their house than by talking with them.

The picture that has lingered in my mind since I saw it in 2002 is “Braziers Staircase.” At an artist’s residency he attend near Reading, England, May asked his colleagues there to lend him their footwear for a few days. Most did. He positioned twenty six pairs on a large, opaque skylight. Participants walking through the building could chance upon the installation. Like

much of his work, the gesture is poetic, subtle, and funny, a gentle intervention into the routine world. It is also an ecstatic and melancholic *memento mori*. The artists have ascended in rapture, leaving only their shoes and us behind.