

THE JERWOOD: AN OVERVIEW, 2007-8

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Some years ago, as a trainee director at the Royal Court Theatre, one of my tasks was to read through the 'slush pile': the great slew of unsolicited manuscripts that arrive at the stage door of the Court every single day. The then Literary Manager, Graham Whybrow, pointed out an interesting phenomenon. Periodically artists, like barometers, seem to respond collectively to an invisible tremor in the ether. So it is that one month will bring five plays set on ships in the arctic; the next, a cluster about rehab therapy. It's as mysterious as the mass migration of butterflies. When Roanne Dods first approached me to write this piece, I had no idea I might observe the same kind of occurrence across a year's worth of art – and art in several different disciplines. But so it was.

Initially, I was daunted: how to write about drawing and painting *and* photography, jewellery, and sculpture? But although my first impressions over the year were of diversity, what ultimately fascinated me was the overlap that emerged between the disciplines. Not only in subject matter, but technique. Paintings that were more like sculptures: sculptures with the freedom of a line drawing; jewellery that owed more to Brancusi than Boodle and Dunthorne.

With a pleasing circularity, I ended my year with a return to the same exhibition that started it – *The Jerwood Contemporary Painters*. Revisiting this territory – and comparing the two very different results - is where I will start this story.

I came to the first *Jerwood Contemporary Painters*, in 2007, as an outsider. I had no idea of the judging process, or the artists' own agendas. But it was impossible, once I found myself looking at the paintings, not to imagine and infer.

The first trend that struck me was the evident desire to push at the boundaries of what a 'painting' was. One 'painting' consisted of a teetering pile of fifty thin, slightly worn seventies paperbacks. Not a painting of them: an actual pile of books. This work (by Damien Roach) was titled *River, Trees, Cloud, Sky*. Enigmatically so, until you saw that the spectrum of colours in the books' spines subtly faded from blue, to sky blues, to green, to navy once more. The piece, for me, worked, since even before you decode it, the books bring their own queer Gestalt.

Similarly, *10 in 12* at first glimpse seemed to be a Miro-like abstraction - an orange square with a black and white three-quarter moon in its centre. But on looking at the materials used, I double-took - 'Ten inch vinyl Record, 12 inch cardboard sleeve'. The black and white 'moon' was in fact the vinyl record, peeping through the window of its outsize sleeve.

Other artists, meanwhile, took *only* the paint, and played with it as a sculptor would. *Parlour* (Nick Fox) was a repro Edwardian table, covered with a 'tablecloth' – actually, a slick rubbery skin of acrylic paint, lacy flower and

marshland silhouette cut out of its periphery, then decorated with Seurat spots and tiny semi-pornographic apparitions. Perhaps a comment on Edwardian repression and propriety: after all, the original function of the table-cloth was to hide the suggestive legs of the table.

Are these 'Paintings'? No, not in the conventional sense, perhaps. But they explore what a painting explores – in the first two cases, colour, composition, abstraction - just without the paint; in the second, by sculpting it.

And the same debate with paint is still ongoing this year. Tom Crawford has two entries in *Jerwood Contemporary Painters, 2008: Product painting (the life and death of an abstract painter)* and *Product painting (the best painting I never made)*. The second is the crumpled chrysalis of white 'gesso' from inside the paint pot – a collapsed mould of the jar itself, formed by the dried skin of the paint left inside. I recognised the dilemma. The powerful moments in a piece of writing frequently seem to come about purely by accident, unwilling by the writer. Just as the concertinaed shroud of paint has a boldness that a painting carefully painted in it might never possess, perhaps it is every artist's job simply to recognise, preserve, and frame these happy accidents when they occur. But the *Product Paintings* also ask the question, what is the logical endpoint for the artist? Both titles (not without humour) allude to inherent self-annihilation.

While it was a privilege to see the same debate pinging back and forth over the gulf of a year, it was particularly fascinating to witness the fragile and evolving ecology of the annual *Jerwood Contemporary Painters* exhibition itself.

Here's an example. Both years included one piece of video art. Last year, the video piece (*Revenge of the insides: a movement in which nothing happens*, by Lucy Pawlak) was set aside in its own tiny darkened booth, and accompanied by its own soundtrack. In fact, it was the disembodied noise (the clattering flicker of old film, the heavy saw of a cello, bangs and crashes) and the mystery of what lay in the booth that attracted me to it straight away – ignoring all the other pictures in the Jerwood Space 3. In tight, claustrophobic focus, the film ranged over what I thought might be the squalor of an artist's studio - a still life of apples stuck to a mirror, a piece of paper with 'who am I kidding' scrawled on it, garlic, a fringed lampshade. I found it hard to leave until I knew the film had completed its loop. Essentially, *Revenge*, although superficially presented in isolation from the rest of the works, had succeeded (justly or not) in hijacking the viewer from them – it would have been very hard for me to study all the other pieces in the room first.

So I was fascinated to see, the second time around, how the selectors (also primarily responsible for the placing of the artwork) had dealt this time with film's challenging tendency to mug the eye and attention. Here, the video piece (*The Knoll*, Sophie Lascelles) was placed on an equal footing with the other competing works, projected openly into a corner of the room.

This piece shows a 35mm film (silent, this time) of a faraway girl endlessly swinging, plunging away on her makeshift swing that hangs from the branches of a high tree, down into the grotto below and back up again. The jolt of pleasure I got from the giddy swoop of perspective was further intensified by the film's projection onto a piece of paper, cut out to match the dimensions of the tree, and placed taut over the recessed corner of the room. Thus, the girl seemed literally to swing away from a three dimensional tree, down, down and away into the dark corner of the room. The contours of the gallery space, far from being an inconvenience, were utilised and added to the effect of the video.

Intrigued, I spoke to Sarah Williams, one of the Jerwood coordinators, about the etiquette of curatorship. She confirmed that it had been a conscious re-think not to segregate the video from the rest this year. But this decision had thrown up its own problems. The video requires darkness – therefore, every other painting in the room had to be lit with a spotlight. How did they choose which pieces could withstand this stark presentation? Tentatively, Sarah confirmed what I had thought – that the other pieces nearby were particularly direct, loud and bold: robust enough to withstand the lighting, and competition with the video.

Which brings one to the question: how best to create a 'conversation' in the placing of the pieces? The gallery-goer rarely considers the agonising over what hangs next to what. I certainly hadn't – until comparing the two exhibitions, last year and this. In 2008's exhibition, I was immediately struck - in contrast to the year before - by the clarity of the dialogue at play. The exhibition felt altogether more poised, focussed. Puzzled, I went back to the catalogue for 2007, and my suspicions were confirmed. There were a third less artworks selected: twenty, as opposed to thirty in 2007. The marked difference in feel was extraordinary. Was the second actually of a higher quality, or did it simply feel so because it *was* more select, and considered? One thing was certainly apparent: the fewer artworks, the more distinct and distilled the 'conversation' can be.

An example: in 2008, there, in Space 1, was the colourfully Calderesque sculpture *Goodbye to dignity*. Placed on the wall opposite it was *High Holborn 3/white red blue yellow*. *High Holborn* is an oil of a disembodied crate, girders, and bright abstract squares. *Goodbye to dignity* is a totem-pole of gaudy tables, wooden struts, and red clamps. The similar colours of the two pieces clearly spoke to each other, as did their subjects.

And of course, the artists have their own demands as to how their work is hung. Thanks to the generous space-to-picture ratio in the 2008 exhibition, it was possible for *The Masterpiece*, an oil in blues of a man's crotch, to be hung alone and high on a striking maroon wall. On enquiring, I discovered the whole wall had been painted maroon at the artist's request. It was a witty comment, like the ornate gold frame of the piece, on the trappings of the classic art gallery, extending the work's ironic humour beyond its frame.

Twenty works, instead of thirty. How do these choices come about? By the time the judging of the Jerwood Drawing Prize came around, in the summer of 2007, I was very curious. I asked whether I could watch the judges, or rather, selectors, in action: I was itching to see what the criteria for selection were, and what kind of input the selectors were dealing with.

It was the tsunami volume of entries that shocked me the most. I had a vague mental image of a few piles of drawings. I turned up on a muggy July afternoon at the Wimbledon College of Art to find a full-scale military operation in play. The three judges - Paul Bonaventura, Avis Newman and Catherine De Zegher – were on their second day out of three allotted for the judging. Ruthlessly, tirelessly, they were working their way through the *two thousand, six hundred and twelve* drawings submitted – the aim being to make a shortlist of fifty. The only way to get through the submissions in the given time was a carefully choreographed sweep through two large rooms. As the judges decided which to shortlist and which reject, thirty volunteer students from the college followed behind them, in three waves, collecting up the pieces they had looked at, and laying down a fresh carpet of new entries to be judged - like an elaborate ritual from the court of Versailles. The judges would return to where they had begun: and find a fresh hundred to cull. A Sisyphean task with no time for dithering, or second thoughts.

When I joined them, the judges were giving their legs a break by sitting to watch some of the video entries. There was a black comedy in listening to the painstaking but often brisk assessments:

‘This is terrible. Can we fast forward that?’

‘Oh, I see, right, it’s regeneration, seasons.’

‘We can see what’s coming here. Can we fast forward this? – Oh, that was it. No. Not for me.’

‘I think some of these people really need to think about editing.’

‘And this one we’re giving the thumbs down to? Fantastic.’

Attention turned to the floor again. Tactfully chivvying them, whenever they lost momentum, was Prof. Anita Taylor, the Dean of the College and the Director of the Jerwood Drawing prize, murmuring ‘Unless they grab you now, I would think...’ A recurrent difficulty was the desire to discriminate positively.

‘I wonder if it will get better the more you look at it...’

‘I don’t like anything in this room...and yet one feels obliged to...’

‘...I want to like this. Why can’t I?’

‘Because you’ve seen too many.’

Like my plays on the slush pile at the Royal Court, trends were obviously apparent. ‘Dogs...well, dogs are always popular, aren’t they.’

‘Maps...part of the language this year...’ - only to be curtly rebuffed -

‘-I think we should be able to find a better one.’

If there *is* a trend, at least go for the best example of it. Also rejected were the cravenly derivative - ‘I thought Lucian might not enter this year,’ joked one judge – and the downright crass –

‘Put it in the porno corner.’

At the end of the day, I reluctantly left the judges to their task – but I was curious to see what the results would be.

The answer? An exhibition of *eighty-seven works* – a huge amount, the largest exhibition of my whole year. If anything, the judges had discriminated too positively. Wandering round the Jerwood Spaces, I recognised several pieces from my afternoon in Wimbledon. The judges' fatigue descended on me too.

But just as economical selection clarifies the dialogue from piece to piece, the sheer breadth of this sample of British drawing told you something in its cacophony. At the most basic level, it was interesting statistically. The works began to resolve into recurrent themes – although approached with wildly varying techniques. What were the three trends that I noticed? Science, ecology, and the childhood fairy tale.

Let me explain what I mean by 'science'. Again and again, I saw 'pictures' which played with the language of scientific presentation. *Mathematics Problem* (Mary Roundfield) explored the dislocation between the diagrammatic and the free, with a graph of the perfect parabolic curve, and a leotarded female figure bent, enclosed within the parabola. Interestingly, the artist's first career was as a teacher of maths and statistics. The jeweller Ramon Puig Cuyas has written: 'Art and science share a common origin. Both disciplines intend to explain the world...by creating new ways of thinking about and representing the universe.' But he then differentiates: 'the scientist works to produce a hypothesis...by contrast, the artist is not obligated to arrive at any final or conclusive point.'

However, this is perhaps a false distinction. Many of these artists yoked exactly these two opposing modes to produce their art, the paradoxical combination giving the work its sting - often humorously. *Studio Environment* (by Sophie Horton) was a poker-faced sound graph that presented the sounds in her studio using thick pieces of woolly thread, green for quiet and red for noises, meticulously labelled – 'mobile phone', 'gossip', 'white noise'. It is, she explains, 'an obsessive labour-intensive survey objectifying a subjective experience...a cathartic reaction to noise pollution from the studios surrounding my own...'

Likewise, *Reasons for Non-Achievement*, by Susie Parfitt, was a drolly intricate bar-chart tabulating the artist's failure to accomplish anything. Crucially, the scale is small enough that we don't at first question: it looks convincing. The meticulous, Lilliputian detail has its own abstract beauty, and then, slowly revealed, is the comic tension between the dourly literal tabulation, the crayon bars with knowingly self-deluding labels such as 'priority actions', and the actual anarchy of the title. An ironic exposition of the way we justify the chaotic shortcomings of our lives.

The permeable membrane between life and art is always interesting. A well-known novelist told me once that those fledgling writers who were most generously subsidised by their governments (Germans, Scandinavians) were

also those who had most difficulty finding a subject; and cruelly parodied a typical opener: 'Hans stared at the wall...' Writers naturally look to themselves for material: denied *any* need to forage in the outside world, solipsism can be deadly.

But for some of these artists, claustrophobic creative isolation was fruitful. I was taken by Paul Westcombe's polystyrene and paper cups, covered in tiny, detailed drawings of slightly grotesque phantasmagoria, echoing the tide-mark still left in the cup. He explains: 'The coffee cups started as a project during a job I had as a car park attendant and were done after I had finished my morning coffee and were doodled on in an attempt to relieve the boredom of a 12hr shift...They don't offer any escape routes, there simply aren't any; to retreat into the world of the imagination is to meet with the grim realisation the subjective has been entirely colonised.'

Although less candid in its exposure of the artist's mental life, I would also place Lizzie Cannon's *Helminths* in this category. This piece was a series of mounted scraps of carpet debris, transformed by the artist, in the tradition of botanical drawings, into larvae-like creatures, mini-squids, amoebae, tapeworms. The artist as alchemist, metabolising the squalor of everyday life, the genesis of the art echoing its subject's own imagined biological evolution. Lizzie Cannon further clarifies, '*Helminths* was made in response to an uneasiness I have about worms. I find myself unnerved by the threads and fluff that collect on the carpet as, at a glance, they can look like worms.' I was reminded of Miro's fevered imagination, projected onto his banal surroundings like a shadow play: 'How did I think up my drawings and my ideas for painting? Well I'd come home to my Paris studio in Rue Blomet at night, I'd go to bed, and sometimes I hadn't any supper. I saw things, and I jotted them down in a notebook. I saw shapes on the ceiling...'

And yet there was an equal and opposing camp in this same exhibition. Resolutely outward-looking, political rather than personal, concerned with the traumas and turbulence of the world beyond the artist. This makes it sound as if the works were clunky, illustrating great balsa-wood '*Ideas*': but vitally, in most cases, the initial germ of the idea was metabolised beyond recognition. An ecological conscience made a popular starting point. The artist as barometer: quite literally. *Coastlines*, by Tone Holmen, was a lacy spider's web of entangled coastlines, 'one in a series of works that consider the effect travelling has on global warming.' *A Global Positioning System*, by Melanie Jackson was a digitally animated piece on DVD which traced every source material and industrial process involved in the manufacture of a handheld GPS device. No heavy-handed morals were drawn: it was fascinating simply as a piece of narrative. *Sublime Climes*, by Daisy Richardson, employed stop frame animation on DVD. Torn up photos were shifted about to create, like a time accelerated video, cities climbing, continents shifting, an alluring play between the flat and the 3D, naïve animation and the vast, uncontrollable impersonality of nature it attempted to depict. A light flashes through the shifting plates – lava. Mountain ranges crowd up. Flamingos fly jerkily by. Refugee camps are devoured by ice. The city is vanquished. And the mountains return...The method employed, I was interested to see, was

consciously chosen to harness this conflict between inner and outer: 'I was looking in part at the ideas of Xavier De Maistre in his novel *Journey Around my Room*. As the novel charts an expedition from one part of his bedroom to another, the animation depicts a miniaturised journey around a table-top...I used books, magazines, newspapers and internet printouts to reflect the tension between exterior and interior space...'

Other artists tapped directly into the forces of ecology outside, to make their art: in *Rain Drawing*, by Brigid Lowe, '...repeated horizon lines were hand-drawn on the paper. The drawing was then exposed to rainfall.' This piece found an answering echo in Tim Knowles' *Tree Drawing*, produced by tying a pen to a tree branch, every movement in the breeze thus recorded on the easel positioned below. In both these pieces, the imprint of the natural instrument created art in its own image: the rain-drops immortalized in the lines they splattered, the Scots pine leaving a dense, needly branch of ink on the page.

Interestingly, the natural form was nowhere more prevalent as an inspiration than in the *Jerwood Applied Arts Prize: Jewellery*. Nora Fok's work *Prunus Amygdalus*, a wrist piece, looked like a great flower, complete with tiny rusty stamens, and her headpiece, *Walking Onions*, is explicit in its homage to nature. Yoko Izawa's work, predominantly created by meshed nylon stretched over polypropylene bobbles, for me evoked marine life, seaweed and shells. As did the gloriously slick, colourful, bulbous acrylic pieces of Adam Paxon – decorative jellyfish and anemones, as their names suggested – *Squirring Rings with Tail*, for instance. It was either nature, for the jewellers, or childhood, or both: Grainne Morton's enamel corsages were 'drawn from the aesthetic beauty and abstraction of nature in the illustrations of children's books.'

A return to simplicity seems to be a theme. Antony Gormley has said, we all draw as children – and then we stop. Why? He argues drawing should be as natural as seeing, hearing, speaking: a way of thinking out aloud, a daily activity – as it is when we are young. In the *Jerwood Drawing Prize*, I particularly liked Julie Cockburn's *An Attempt to Copy a Drawing I Made When I Was Five* – the original colourful crayoned necklace, copied below using needle and embroidery thread, the method a transposition of the initial childish difficulty and labour. She says, 'I was struck by the uninhibited mark-making and the simple, yet vital, decisions I had made. Everything about it seemed integral, and it was this carefree confidence that captivated me.'

Which provokes the question - how does this freedom of expression get censored? How can the artist re-discover it?

For me, two pieces, in slightly different ways, embodied exactly this crucial, unfakeable, child-like confidence. *Big Lady*, by Shareena Hill, was a bold, free-handed drawing of a pregnant lady, bent over, with a small inked figure of a cowboy on her back. Joyous rather than sinister, with all the immediacy of ink straight on paper, this picture leapt out at me just as it had when I'd seen it

in Wimbledon. Particularly memorable was its self-assurance. It didn't fit into any trend; it felt completely original.

And *My Best Friend*, by Chosil Kil, was an oddly haunting piece, but shared the same assurance. A series of rubbed-out naively drawn figures, with a tiny doll-like figure at the beginning, and what looked like criss-crossing ashes at the end. The smudged rubbing-out gave the illusion of the frenetic speed of life, and, cornily, Beckett came into my head: 'We give birth astride the grave.' But on a second look, blurred, half rubbed out sentences are visible: 'my mom always told me that you come into this world by yourself and leave it by yourself' - and it becomes apparent that there are always *two* figures in the blur. Kil elaborates: 'I drew all my past bestfriends one by one and then rubbed them off...The trace of a smudge on the paper is left as a 'souvenir' of the memories - transferred from the abstract to the concrete.' I was impressed by how clearly the artist's aim had communicated itself, even before any verbal explanation.

Childhood is an immensely potent source. First, as a well-spring of material - just as it is for the writer, and the actor. But even more importantly, for the artist, in the unselfconsciousness of its creative impulses (the crayoned necklace).

Antony Gormley, opening the first exhibition of 2008, *Space to Draw*, spoke publicly for the first time about his work, and began with his childhood. Remembering the atmosphere of his old school art room, he described the teacher who told him to 'draw from the shoulder'. Even now, although drawing for him has become something else completely, he still draws with the whole arm, so the impulse travels, he explains, unpolluted, like a 'seismic graph' direct from the brain, down the length of the arm - 'drawing out - like drawing water...'

It was a revelation to me, after looking at so much art, finally to hear an artist describing how he made it, and what it means to him.

'A drawing fixes the world, a drawing is a diagram, a drawing is a lens which can be looked through both ways; out into space and back into the mind.'

Hockney talks of what we see out of the corner of our eye, 'a vital provider of visual knowledge though never talked about...painting sees what the camera can't.' Gormley elaborated on the same theme: 'If we think of the edges of our experience, we have a mind in a body which has a liminal edge, which is the skin, but somehow there is a perceptual edge which is the horizon, it's the end of what you can see, it's the limit of your perceptual body world. I have asked you as the viewer to put yourself into this absence.'

I was fascinated to hear this spin on the inner/outer dichotomy. But how does Gormley *make* art that expresses it?

At moments, it seems to be an almost mystical process: 'a kind of oracular process that requires tuning in to the behaviour of substances as much as to

the behaviour of the unconscious – like reading images in tea leaves.’ And yet, Gormley also talks about his art in the most matter-of-fact terms. While other people go for a jog, it is the way Gormley prefers to start his day; ‘a good session of drawing is like going for a good rugged physical adventure on a blustery day with changing conditions of light and rain.’ Again, I was reminded of Hockney, who said of his recent *Bigger Trees Near Warter*, ‘Partly it’s just that I enjoy the big physical gesture of waving my arm across a canvas...Those big Picassos are about him throwing his arm around.’

Ultimately, of course, making art is a changeable thing – for Gormley, drawing at night, ‘it is easier to withdraw into the inner realm’. Rather like writing, there is also the need to ‘get into the space of drawing as a place of contemplation...I don’t know what the necessary state of receptivity is, in the making of drawing, but it’s something that you have to *get into*.’

This may sound precious, but Gormley’s attitude towards his materials is specific, pragmatic, right down to the weight of the paper -

‘I’ve been using the same paper for 30 years: Somerset Linen Handmade, it’s actually made for etching so it’s absorptive, it’s quite thick, 100gsm so it can take a bit of punishment...Drawing is about thinking, but it is also about the material. Substances should not be taken for granted; they are not innocent partners.’

He uses his own blood, milk, oil, semen, coffee, lamp black, earth. He showed us pictures he had drawn with an underarm deodorant, and pictures made with an inky ball-bearing – ‘the line is the trajectory of the ball being dropped.’

Suddenly I understood, in a way I hadn’t before, the relationship between artist, line, and space. Gormley summarised it as ‘trying to make a map of a path of feeling, a trajectory of thought.’ He explained how lately he has become ‘obsessed’ with simply describing wide circles on his Somerset Linen, in some cases actually cutting into the paper with the force of the line, the culmination of a long journey for him: ‘I realised that a drawing could be a place where things became, just appeared spontaneously almost within the medium...’ What particularly exhilarates him is ‘the liberation of line from description, the freeing of lines became a register of an energy field. It happened first in sculpture, drawing released into space.’

This can sound a little opaque, until you actually look at the pieces that formed Gormley’s part of *Space to Draw. Feeling Material* was a ‘sculpture’ of a man, a whirlwind of coiled wire; a scribble made 3D in space. It illustrates exactly what Gormley describes above: the sense of movement is incredibly strong – it really is as if the physical action of drawing in space has been captured. As you move around it, it changes, much more strikingly than a more conventional sculpture. From the side, it is dark, dense; it is only as you move round to the front that the scribble resolves itself into the figure, the darknesses changing and shifting. There is a voluptuous pleasure in the wilder swoops.

Space to Draw invited the artists to consider the relationship between sculpture and drawing. Michael Shaw's series of animated drawings could almost have been preparatory sketches for Gormley's sculpture – a whirling doodle that we travel into, 3D like a raffia skirt, into close-up, a speeded up version of drawing. The scribbling shape morphs itself into a top, into a skittle – then we move into the very blur of the jumping strokes. In comparison, I found the sculpture Michael Shaw paired with this piece, a kind of inflated PVC dinghy, much less exciting. It failed to preserve the kinetic verve of his brilliant 'sketch'.

But other pieces in the same exhibition were seductive variants on the theme. I particularly liked two of Neville Gabie's works. One was a series of 'found drawings' in Western Australia: photo after photo of the skid marks of tyres on the road. The variety was almost comic. Straight, long, dark pairs; light scribbles; one dancing wiggle; two tottering tracks – and all framed in the disappearing perspective of the road.

Wide-eyed and legless was a series of three video pieces created by flying a kite with a video camera suspended just below. Truly, here, to use Gormley's words, the line is the 'register of an energy field...drawing released into space.' Gabie writes, 'I guide [the kite] through the air over the surface of the landscape, as one might a pencil on paper, in one direction, then another...the physical activity of moving through the terrain, of guiding the kite in the air above, has so many parallels with drawing. It has something to do with the concept of translating a three dimensional space onto a flat surface.' But while this work certainly grappled with the brief given to the artists, the actual quality of the art produced – blurred shifting horizons – felt less convincing, less interesting, than the concept itself.

Which point – quality, or the lack of it, or need of it, or even, the existence of it – brings me to Gormley's other pieces – *Clearing 57, 59, and 60*. These were examples of the frenzied loops he had described to us. And here I felt he had been a little disingenuous. In his talk, Gormley had claimed, 'it's about being there in a *non-judgmental way*. For me it's about immersion. With these I was going to say the good ones are when I am 100% there but often that's not the case. I'll go back later and find that ones from quite early on in the session are actually better than later on, there is no explaining this. *I think you have to give up all of those ideas about product and what the thing looks like or stopping because you think that's perfect...*' (my italics).

My point is this. These three particular pieces – ink and casein – were perfect in their composition of swoops on the paper; carefully framed; things of beauty. Gormley *had* stopped before they just became a confused tangle. The artist *is* an editor, whatever he may claim. Just as Neville Gabie had carefully framed his shots of the random tyre skids, Gormley chose these efforts above others. Ultimately, he had 'been there' in a judgemental way, even in only selecting them. And everything, the bleeding of the carbon into the paper, the grey wash of the paper's hue, the choice of frame, the tiny flaws and burrs caught on the paper, the furring where the pen has bitten into it...every detail comes together to make this a product, to make it work as a piece of art.

Editing, framing, emphasis: nowhere are these aspects of the artist more apparent than in photography. *The Jerwood Photography Prize* was, I think, one of my favourite exhibitions, and it is for this reason that I come to it last. It also seemed to illustrate, in microcosm, all of the themes of the other exhibitions in one collection.

Like the Drawing Prize, an ecological conscience formed the starting point for at least two artists. Sophie Gerrard took as her subject the burgeoning problem of illegal electronic waste in India: but rather than preaching, *E-Wasteland* managed to celebrate the almost painterly beauty of grim industrial silt. The colours of the rusting circuit boards were reminiscent of a Hodgkin. A huge wilting pile of plastic keyboards looked paradoxically organic, like a stack of banana-leaves. Gerrard's photographs played ironically with the deceptive picturesque rusticity of toxic waste in a beautiful way. Meanwhile, in *Protoplasm*, Kevin Newark showed us plastic bags in canals as we've never seen them before: ghostly, dreamy images, the black depths of the water like space, the algae explosions of asteroids, faraway galaxies, the bags themselves intestinal, or foetal, but always haunting, hanging in space.

Just as Gormley alchemises earth and blood, so, frequently, it seems to be the role of the artist to find the transcendental in the everyday, and transform it for us. To digress a moment from photography: this species of transmogrification was nowhere more apparent than in the Jerwood Sculpture Prize. Three examples. In *Barrier Fence*, Graham Guy-Robinson took the banality of orange webbing put up by workmen near roadworks, and literally alchemised it, replicating it as a glossy ribbon of polished stainless steel, gradually punched by more and more holes. Jonathan Parsons, in *Terminator*, converted the capillaries of an intercity rail map into a strange, up-ended, steel forked tree. And Graham Seaton took two polystyrene packing-fillers and cast them in concrete, so hugely expanded in scale they resembled a space-craft, or unfamiliar house of worship.

It is a cliché to say it is the gift of the artist to appropriate the familiar and frame it, put it in a different context so it shocks us once again. But it's a cliché because it's true. Perhaps the cleverest example of this was the work of Moira Lovell, in *The After School Club*. Deliberately, I did not look at the explanation of the work, but at the photographs first: a series of young women, sometimes sullen and dead-eyed, often warriorlike, combative, bullied-looking, watchful, traumatised – all standing in various improvised versions of school uniform, in front of bland public-looking buildings. The clothes, too-small, shrunken, are incongruous in the inclement weather. My notes ask, 'They are not long out – but they are not school girls – so *why?*'

In fact, these were girls the photographer found in school-themed night clubs, which she then photographed in daylight, in front of their old schools. The artist's trick of de-contextualising is turned on its head – the girls are put back in the *correct* context – and the literal reality of something they tried on as metaphor, as fantasy, the night before, is thus paradoxically given its alienating spin, seen in the cold light of day.

Before I knew this, the girls to me had suggested nothing so much as sex-workers: and so this series of photographs was matched and answered by another in the same exhibition - *Not Natasha*, by Dana Popa. Again, evidence of a carefully curated 'conversation' at play. 'Natasha' is the derogatory name given to prostitutes in the republic of Moldova, and this was a series of portraits of girls, some now out of sex-traffic, some not, with their real names and ages. It was the context that gave these photographs their charge; most of the photographs were riotously colourful, and many of the girls simply looked like beautiful, happy teenagers. However, with others, you could clearly see the damage on their faces. For me, the most haunting was *Elena, 23*: The first impression was of an eerily empty, faceless head, hair hanging down, bent despairingly into a clenched fist. In fact, it was an empty wig (the one the girl used to use), held up in front of her face, to mask her from the camera. The caption simply read: 'Why do you have to dig up my life again?'

Maybe I responded so strongly to the photography exhibition because it reminded me of the cannibalism of the writer in its selective use of real characters, real stories: a necessarily ruthless appropriation of other people's lives and experiences for the artist's own ends.

There was no more striking example of this than Edmund Kevill Davies, in his series *Puppet Love*: the last practising ventriloquists in England, captured with their dummies. In each case, the unwitting sitters unconsciously revealed a narrative, and whether accurate or not, it was cleverly appropriated and highlighted by the photographer. The stories were so different, each merits a description.

In *The Tamleys*, we see a large young family, sitting on and around a sofa. Firstly, there is a pleasing thematic echo at play. There are three different puppets dotted around the family, but it is the family itself which looks doll-like, their expressions slightly 'held', one little girl stiffly in her best dress, a toddler held on the father's hip, like a ventriloquist's dummy. Even the dog, with its mouth ajar, is puppet-like. Two of the little girls are twins, highlighting the way that we, like the puppets, are also in some ways made to a basic mould. But particularly brilliant is the nakedly resentful expression on the wife's face, standing behind the sofa; and the husband's complete ignorance of her alienation, beaming with all the placid bliss of his puppet on the piano stool beside him.

Similarly, *The Byletts* shows the toll, or intrusion, of ventriloquism on a marriage. The husband and wife are posed in the bedroom, an intimate array of face-creams behind them on the bedside table, and the pin-suited puppet placed squarely between them on the bed. Here, the most shocking thing is how similar the wife looks to the (male) puppet, with her kohled eyes and red, carved-looking mouth; an effect heightened by the husband's protective arm, placed behind both their backs. The husband's face, next to the two of them, looks amorphous, ill-defined. More and more you ask yourself about the quirks of the man who has engineered this company for himself.

The Kings was one of the most poignant photographs. A now old ventriloquist sits with his grown-up daughter and little-old-man puppet. Above him, on the wall, hangs an oil, of himself as a younger man - posed again with his puppet. A grim variant on *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, the obvious irony is that the puppet has not aged, but the man visibly has, and now closely resembles the puppet, down to the reddened veins on his nose. The daughter now has her arm protectively round her father, echoing the pose of his younger self with the dummy in the painting.

And lastly, *The Dumases*: in an open-plan kitchen, the parents peer through an archway at their grown-up son, who is holding a denim-suited puppet, proudly presenting him to the viewer. Somehow, the puppet looks effeminate, camp – and not unlike the man who holds him. The parent's expressions are timid, slightly worried, and the implied message is clear: a gay son in denial about his sexuality, expressing it unconsciously through the puppet...suddenly it struck me that the master-puppeteer at work here was not the ventriloquist, but the photographer himself, who had so skilfully manipulated his sitters, voicing a story through his subjects as clearly as if they had spoken aloud.

This imposition of a darker fictional narrative is irresistible. For all we know, the ventriloquists and their families are actually happy and fulfilled. But as I extrapolated these 'hidden' hypothetical narratives from the photographs I was struck by the fact this was reality and yet not reality: and in a sense, reality is what all artists struggle, grapple, and kick against, whether they reject it, transmute it, or try faithfully to evoke it. To return to Gormley once more: he confesses he feels most free when the line is liberated from description. But a successful piece of art – of which, over this year, I saw many – has, as he describes, 'a kind of an authenticity but also an uncanniness, it's a displacement...they act like traps or places to think and to be.'

It's ingrained in us to try to make sense of things. Stephen Daldry has said of audiences, 'we Hoover up narrative.' The more we are displaced, the longer we will stay with the art, 'in the trap', trying to work it out, to decode, to uncover 'the story.' The best art, as Gormley puts it, is 'like a relic or a proof. It's like evidence at the scene of a crime.'