

Still, Life: The Work of Jodie Carey

By Gilda Williams for the exhibition catalogue *Still, Life*,
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When in 1923 the art historian Roger Fry questioned the attribution of a particular still-life to that master of the domestic interior, Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin, he was troubled it might not be the work of Chardin's hand because the objects were all 'too carefully arranged to be painted: arranged too with more care than intelligence.' Arranging, it can be assumed here, is not what artists are meant to do. They may compose, they may sketch; they may sculpt and they may carve, but not arrange, a mere domestic activity, something presumably done with diligent 'care' rather than the more artful 'intelligence'. Fifty years after Fry's suspicions regarding an artist who might have been caught in the act of 'arranging', in 1983 the artist Louise Lawler published a series of black-and-white photographs which presented purchased artworks hung in galleries and residential interiors, often against the backdrop of furniture – Robert Longo works displayed around a modernist-inspired dining room in her gallerist's apartment, or a pair of Cindy Sherman photographs hung casually by the coat rack. Lawler titled the series 'Arrangements of Pictures'; her choice of words again connoted the same somewhat fussy, domestic endeavor. It is not, say, 'exhibiting', much less 'curating', but arranging – by implication a much lesser, distinctly bourgeois activity.

Sculptor Jodie Carey is an accomplished arranger, and artist, exquisitely arranging not just her chosen objects themselves – the newspaper-flowers, the bones, the feathers and the furniture – but also the associations and references borne out in each. All this arranging, we recognize, is a distinctly feminine sort of work traditionally unworthy of much art-historical attention. 'Arranging' belongs unmistakably to the genre of still-lives, a 'secondary' form of painting which art historian Norman Bryson claimed was overlooked for so many centuries – dismissed as a lesser genre with respect to portraiture, history painting and landscape – precisely because still-lives reflect a space in which women live out their lives, rather than the greater settings inhabited by men. In short, the persisting tendency to downgrade the genre of still life is profoundly rooted in the historical oppression of women. Quiet 'arranging' is not meant to forge grand, intellectually significant connections among objects the way curating is meant to do, for example; it is rather the tidy task of creating harmony, balance, perhaps symmetry in the effort to impress one's guests or simply to make one's surroundings pleasant.

'Arranging' is, nevertheless, the right term for what Jodie's Carey does in her careful art; she has arranged a tea cup on a side table (*Untitled*, 2002); stockades of bone-shaped decorations on a wedding cake (*Untitled [Monument]* 2006), balls of dust carefully beaded along the wire armature of a baroque sort of chandelier (*Untitled [chandeliers]* 2006); a pelvic bone and flowery borders on an ornamental wall plaque (*Pelvis*, 2006); and feathers in a drawer alongside plants on items of furniture, themselves arranged into a sculptural stack (*Untitled [Furniture]*, 2008). The artist has even arranged flowers, an activity in which the verb is most customarily used, either at home or in the commercial setting of a florist's. Her installations *The Daily Mail* (2005) and *Untitled [installation]* (2007) were both made up of five traditional funeral wreaths, unexpectedly fabricated out of newspapers that have been soaked in blood, tea and coffee. In *Untitled [installation]*, each wreath is positioned upon its own tomb-like monument of carved white lard creating a sort of mausoleum setting or corpse-less funeral. 'Faced with a crisis, the English put the kettle on', Carey has said, and it is this spirit of middle Englishness – gathering around the kitchen table, drinking tea and coffee while reading the terrifying news in the *Daily Mail* as if it were a storybook – that lies very much at the heart of Jodie Carey's work. Carey's *Daily Mail* recalls T.S. Eliot's portrayal of the English returning home to the routine comfort of international catastrophes on the television news, which keep one company night after night. Carey's work too speaks of all the tabloid murders, wars, stabbings and assorted atrocities, and the endless cups of tea and coffee that are drunk to wash it all down. *Daily Mail*'s somber forms were placed around the perimeter of a small room at Goldsmiths College and after a while, the stench upon entering the room became unbearable. It wasn't the blood going off which reeked, as one might expect, but the old tea and coffee growing dank. One reason flowers were originally used at funerals was to conceal the smell of the decaying body; here, in contrast, the 'flowers' aggravated the stench of old news – of bad news that won't go away and our unsuccessful attempts to smother it all. As regards public monuments such as the supremely English Cenotaph at White Hall which these lard pedestals recall, Carey has said, 'Even though they're designed to inspire a sense of reverence, glory and fame, we actually build public monuments as a way of putting things aside and moving on – not so much lest we forget, but lest we remember. They never actually look like the feelings we have when we lose someone.'

Daily Mail, produced while Carey was still a student, points to the constants emerging in young Jodie Carey's work. First there is the insistent reference to 'little England' and 'middle Britain', the unadorned, sometimes comforting and sometimes cruel everyday life of *Daily Mail* readers, a thrifty, family-centred, protective community often built around women and their tireless advice and unpaid labour. Carey has spoken of the extraordinary/ordinary women in her family, their modest houses and the traditions they kept as supremely meaningful and close to her – without any of the patronizing or pitying or judgmental sentiment which an outsider might adopt. In a sense Carey's works are private monuments (in contrast to the more usual public ones) unusually filled with the kind of sincere reverence and emotion which is often dispensed with in more conventional and public acts of remembrance.

In *Albion. The Origins of the English Imagination*, Peter Ackroyd describes the prevailing quality of English tragedy and tragic-comedy: 'the secret lies in a combined taste for horror; a taste for rhetoric; a taste for ethical commonplace' – an apt description of Carey's sculpture too in many ways. There is with Carey a taste for the gore and disasters of the daily paper; the rhetoric of defense for the women in the artist's life and their often unrecorded efforts; and finally a love for the simple, unpretentious, ordinary lives around her – the 'ethical commonplace' in which she was raised. Moreover, with the work's insistence on blood, bones, funeral rites and decay, as well as the association of the traditional still-life with death (a painted, fleeting moment of life's plenitude pointing towards its imminent, inevitable decline), there is something Gothic about Jodie Carey's work.

'Gothic' is a term associated with the late 18th-early nineteenth literary form and which was originally invented to define a particular romanticized idea of Englishness: a potent but fantasized notion of an indigenous, uncorrupted, proud medieval past. The period's associated form of fiction centring on death, ghosts and family secrets in the literature of Walpole, Shelley, Radcliffe et al, can be reminiscent of the sometimes funereal tone in Carey's art. Furthermore, as I have written elsewhere, 'Always present in the Gothic is this: two things that should have remained apart [...] are brought together'; this is certainly Carey's strategy regarding her unexpected and antithetical combinations of materials: bones are coupled with cake; dust with crystal, blood with paper. One might also connect Carey's work with that of a much later but still very English author, Virginia

Woolf, who talked about women's writings as 'the accumulation of unrecorded life'. Carey's work seems to celebrate the signs that record that invisible female life – in the arrangements of flowers, the decoration of a cake, the placement of furniture. In one early student work Carey painstakingly hand-embroidered an entire sofa with white thread (*Untitled*, 2002), an endless task resulting in near-invisible work (from a distance, the sofa seems merely upholstered in plain white fabric) driving home the notion of women's perpetual hard-labour and its meagre rewards. In writing about the traditional English female and her conspicuous absence in history, Ackroyd speaks of silence as 'the female religion', and there is similarly much silence in Carey's work. The silence of the tomb; the silence of soft feathers absorbing sound. The silence of the funeral parlour. The silence of endless, careful stitching. In another early work *Untitled* (2003), Carey recorded the muffled sound of a television program seeping through the paper-thin walls from a neighbour's TV – the typical soundtrack of a quiet, lazy, homey English afternoon, and as close to silence as many contemporary English urban dwellers will ever come.

Always in Carey's work is the contrasting presence of both decay and preservation. In *Daily Mail*, the tea, coffee and the 'flowers' are decaying, yet these newspaper blooms can never die and so unexpectedly take on something of the permanence associated with traditional sculpture. 'The work is very much about our own mortality,' says Carey. 'Flowers are given at all major milestones in life. We think of bouquets of flowers as beautiful living things but the reality is that the cut flowers are dying and their decay is more symbolic of death and our own mortality than a gesture of life and beauty.' Similarly *Untitled (Monument)*'s plaster cast bones (death) decorate a wedding cake, symbol of a new marriage, a new beginning: the hard, dry 'bones' contrasting moreover with the soft sugar-paste flowers. This monumental sculpture is of an immense multi-tiered cake, of the sort inside of which many years ago a young bikini-clad girl might have crouched until her moment arrived to pop out and surprise the Birthday Boy. Who could pop out from Carey's bone-clad cake if not the aged and bitter Mrs Havensham, Dickens' sublime Gothic creation and now a bag of bones herself, crouching inside Carey's cake for almost a century, still pining for the wedding dress she never wore and which trails about her while a forgotten feast rots on the dining table. This is rather the spirit of Carey's work: the promise of ritual (the wedding, the funeral, a new home) tainted by the inevitability of tragedy, time and decay.

So life and death always co-exist in Carey's art. A chandelier, an illuminated presence, contrasts with the brown, deathly dust ('ashes to ashes; dust to dust ...') from which it is made. The hard, dark wood of the found furniture she uses in her recent sculptures contrasts with the soft white feathers that fill them and the supple plants that adorn them. The yellowing, dry newspaper flowers contrast with the iridescent marble-like lard beneath its as well as the liquids (tea, coffee, blood) used to stain it. By the same token, old-time English tastes and traditions are seen to be fading in her work, yet they are at the same time nostalgically restored in Carey's art as well. Decay and preservation, life and death, dry and wet, organic and inorganic, hard and soft, light and dark all co-exist, as do ideas of inside and out. The blood, the fat (lard) and the bones are innards, like the dust extracted from within Hoovers in *Untitled [chandeliers]*. The feathers too, which can stuff pillows and quilts – resolutely domestic items – are, of course, also the outer 'dressing' of birds while still alive.

The old furniture itself speaks of outer appearances, of Sunday guests examining the quality of the furnishings; of widows with little to remind them of their youthful family life save for the expanse of furniture around them; of both domestic routine and the rituals of hospitality – always the two implied social spaces of the painted still-life as well. W. Somerset Maugham, that supremely English of novelists and short story writers, in his portraits of the early 20th-century British at home and abroad was forever pointing out details in the furniture to fill out his characters: for example, the doomed newlyweds' overpriced new furnishings (they tire of the furniture and even of each other before the couple has entirely paid it all off). Or the burden of lugging trunks and tables about through jungles and cholera-infested landscapes overseas. Or the sheer, unrelenting, weighty ugliness of so much of it. Furniture has a lot to do with 'keeping up appearances' and the social aspirations implied; but furniture can conceal just as well as it can display. Secret drawers, roll-top desks, locked cupboards – all small hidden places which Carey lines with feathers and other soft materials, like tiny coffins. Similarly, varieties of surface and texture are immensely important to her – the malleable softness of the sugar icing soon growing inedibly rock-hard; the brittleness of the old newspaper which, almost miraculously, takes on almost precisely the faded colours of real dried flowers; the hard veneers of the polished wood.

The artist never adds colour but leaves intact the 'colourlessness' of the traditional English home belonging to a certain early-to-mid 20th century period. The artist draws our attention to the peculiar pastels favoured for decorating cakes and parlours – pale greens, faded pinks and insipid yellows – alongside the excessively dark stains applied to the wood (perhaps masquerading as its unaffordable cousin, mahogany?) The tea and coffee stained old-fashioned bad English teeth just as they do Carey's newspaper petals; the newspaper itself is left to turn that recognizable, dull grey-yellow, while the newsprint takes on its particular sooty, illegible quality. In his texts Bryson speaks of still-life as associated with the feminine, but also with depictions of class – from the impoverished, humble still-lives of bread and fish, to luxuriant still-lives all rare fruits, pricey flowers and silver goblets. The contrast between, say, the ostentation of Desportes' Peaches and Silver Platters in comparison with Chardin's homey Basket of Wild Strawberries lies not just in the quality of the objects depicted, but the way the light gleams more brilliantly on the shiny metals and polished surfaces of the rich in contrast to the more muted, softer sort of light which spread over the contents of more modest households. The 'wealth and rank that belongs to the reality of the social world' (Bryson) is always there, literally on display – eventually culminating in the consumerist, Warholian still-lives of Campbell's soup cans and Coke bottles.

Jodie Carey in many ways continues both the traditions that Bryson identifies – firstly, the still-life as concerning itself with 'women's work', and secondly, the still-life as betraying the class of its patron and perhaps even its maker. Carey explains that she retrieved the dust for her chandeliers from the Hoover of a professional cleaner, and that she would only use dust vacuumed up from more affluent homes – poor people's dust was just too grimy. Even the dust belonging to the poor is worse than that of one's better-off neighbours. 'If you die tomorrow,' Carey has said, 'what would be left of you would be in your Hoover.'

In his seminal *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Present Time*, Charles Sterling beautifully associates the still-life painter's own love for life's simple things with the 'commonplace things within the reach of the hand' painted on the canvas itself. This applies well to artist Jodie Carey's own affinity with the objects that she chooses. Although Carey's still-lives can be populated by objects out of reach – blood, bones, or the tell-tale dust languishing inside Hoovers – they are also filled with the small, piercing dramas of everyday life, of everyday death, of everyday Englishness.

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