

An Essay on Rupert Norfolk

Restless Order

Once all the world was like America” 1, said John Locke, who took the Americas of his day as concrete proof of the historical reality of the state of nature. In his mind the continent exhibited itself as a living scene of origin, specifically England’s, and a splendid mine of possibility: vivid, vast and eminently material. In Rupert Norfolk’s pencil drawing *Foliage* that projection of Locke’s colonial enthusiasm, it seems, has passed through the mangle of three centuries’ landscape painting and returned, by way of Henri Rousseau, drained of colour and promise, quite flattened out. *Foliage*’s shallow dimensions are dense with a contrived chaos of fauna, seemingly arranged, for no one’s benefit in particular, in a lacklustre demonstration of botanical diversity. At its centre are lodged a pair of porcine eyes. The scene is precarious, every element threatened with assimilation to a single, tortuously convoluted and indefinitely extended surface. Utterly dominated by its surroundings, the pig seems unable to distinguish itself as a coherent figure from an environment with which it is woefully continuous. Whilst that environment, asserting the concrete particularity of its many and varied moments, in a gross overstatement of the case, has brought its world to the threshold of abstraction.

Norfolk’s graphic method fortifies a pervasive tone of instability. The drawing is unevenly worked. In some areas the paper has become broken and scuffed under frequent and intense revision, resurfaced with a dense pewter shroud. Elsewhere, faintly patterned leaves fail to tally with those rendered with an almost photographic degree of realism. The effect of this delicately judged inconsistency on the image is disruptive. As a piece of illusion it seems very close to failure, that is, to breaking down and declaring itself just to be drawing: a finely mounted assortment of marks, an inconstant assemblage of powdered graphite. Such destruction does not occur but instead exists a dampened suggestion, installed, in a structurally peculiar and unsettling way, as a palpable quality of the image.

Foliage rewards close inspection with the knowledge that its leaves are of the type belonging to the life-size models of plants native to areas of public buildings into which sunlight is unable to penetrate. This can be told by the fine fraying of fabric visible on some of their edges and by what at first glance appear to be incongruous gestural marks, but are in fact the exact reproduction of crude printed patterns. In another pencil drawing, *Bamboo*, it is more obvious that the plant represented has been put together in a factory. Stark distinction between figure and ground, indeed the absence of a definite ground as such, poses *Bamboo* as *Foliage*’s formal opposite and suggests a study directed towards scientific ends. Lit from behind, each of the plant’s pointed leaves displays, as if x-rayed, the consistent dark tone of a central wire vein, and where leaves glance and cross, the varied tone in the areas of overlap shows the light conductive properties of their fabric.

Soft striations running lengthways towards their tips, strategically most apparent on solitary leaves, tell of mechanical embossing. It should be said that this picture is also very beautiful, possibly self-consciously so – an elegant border of two parallel lines, drawn freehand, wobbles coyly. Looking at *Bamboo*, one is reminded of the sense of disquiet that arises when scientists talk about the aesthetic aspect of their work in religious terms. Maybe this is why, despite its beauty, *Bamboo* also has a slightly seedy feel to it, as though its aesthetic appeal also formed part of some less clearly stated demonstration.

Animals completes the set of drawings. It presents the unlikely grouping of an owl, a bear, a deer, and a parrot. At an abstract level the picture’s composition marks out the limits and form of the picture space according to three geometrical figures. A crescent of progressively indistinct circular forms sweeps in an arc around its perimeter. Other forms are aligned in strong diagonal bands. Regarded figuratively, these circular shapes are clearly read as eyes, in the case of the parrot and deer, but lose definition in a jumble of owl, disappearing altogether under the back of the bear’s head, which is folded so far over its face that only the very tip of its nose remains visible. A quarter of a parrot’s head, the

diagonals. Despite the considerable confusion, it is clear that each animal occupies nearly a quarter of the picture’s field, a division corresponding to a restless taxonomy of birds and mammals. Since the animals depicted are, for the most part, easily identified, also because their image clearly derives from a tangle of rubber masks, there is a natural tendency to ascribe boundaries to each. But there is nothing in the picture to suggest that such limits exist. What is given implies an ambiguous condition in which forms hover somewhere between integration and separation, a state of tension between parts and whole encouraged by the picture’s monochromatic unity. For the same reason the creatures’ substance is held in abeyance. Fur and feathers, modelled in shallow relief, cast in rubber, and over printed with a painted pattern, which ignores any requirement to register with its supporting surface, are rendered with calculated infelicity in graphite, a knotted regress of material, represented and actual. Two sculptures are shown at Dicksmith Gallery. Both relate strongly to the floor. *Pixelweave* is a brightly coloured piece of fabric of approximately blanket, or rug, size and proportions, which bears a repeating gridded pattern. Its disturbed surface is set, in rigid undulations that imply the use of a heavy gauge of thread, somewhere between a disorderly set of wrinkles and the more emphatic gatherings of a scrunch. It is apparent that whilst some folds extend in space, others are the illusory effects of tonal shifts and judicious distortions of its pattern. The grid that remains firmly in place is that of the weave itself, the regular mesh of vertical and horizontal threads, which is the literal fabric of the object. A weight of thread and incidence of weave have been specified, by which this original grid subtly intrudes into the illusion. Where the ridge of a fold is implied by an abrupt transition between colours, running obliquely to the weave’s grain, what ought to be a smooth line, steps. At other times, the quality of line is not directly controlled by technical factors and in these cases a decision has been made either to emphasise the weave’s grid, as when relatively large interlocking blocks of colour designate a border, or to suppress it in a fade of hues. The optical effect is somewhat nauseating. *Pixelweave* is just this arrangement of coloured, woven threads and the flickering representation of an object, whose identically coloured threads are not so arranged. On the floor, in another room, sits *I Beams*. Ostensibly this work consists of four, rolled steel joists arranged lengthways, in their most stable position, on one of their broadly flanged surfaces, a grouping that follows no discernable order beyond a common orientation to the floor. Items such as these tend to be museums of accreted matter, rusty, oily, generally encrusted. In burnished rebuttal, *I Beams*’ elements are immaculately turned out. They are like prototypes of an abstract unit of steel rigidity, or standards of cleanliness, that might be stored, under guard, next to the metre of platinum and iridium alloy and measured at 0 degrees centigrade, at the International Bureau of Weights and Measures, Paris.

Walking around *I Beams*, the viewer will notice that whilst some of the impressions of light and environment reflected across its surfaces alter according to changes in the viewer’s position, others do not. *I Beams*’ elements have been skilfully painted with a spray gun to suggest, by highlights and alterations of hue, the behaviour of light striking a metal surface, the glossy quality of paint and its smooth application causing a second, contrary set of reflections. The sculpture presents a set of basic objects that somehow just fail to be identical with themselves.

Pencil drawing, Aubusson tapestry weaving, and painting associated with custom vehicle design, are the technical modes of highly specialized and, by normal standards, niche industries. If the works that Norfolk shows at Dicksmith Gallery appear disparate, it is because of the range of methods and materials used in their production. In terms of producing illusion, each has its own particular constraints. But the idea of that limit as marking a boundary between significance and material is common to all the works, which straddle it uncertainly.

1 Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought; Cambridge, 1988)