Dust to Dust

Exhibition Text by Hettie Judah

‘Petals covered the surface as far as the eye could see. My hands cleared a patch of water for a brief moment, but petals soon came flooding in again to fill it, and then they flowed on, almost as if someone had hypnotised each one of them and was drawing them toward the sea.’
– Yoko Ogawa, *The Memory Police*

What passes between the hand and the petal? Skin finds its counterpart – silk-soft, plump and sun-warmed. Quick to bruise, the petal becomes an emblem of mortality and the passing of time, supplying metaphors of fading beauty and renewal. Watching Phoebe Cummings form wet clay petals against the skin of her hands and arms feels alchemical precisely because of their surface affinity. This fleshy petal carries the grains and curves of the human body, dusty to the eye and cool to the touch. It has the contours of a living thing yet is Pompeii grey. Cummings's lush *nature mortes* have the true funereal stillness of life arrested.

Magdalena Abakanowicz's *Abakans* blend the animal and vegetable – wool and sisal – in heavy, floppy weavings ripe with flaps, lips and openings. Non-specifically erotic, they tease at the prospect of the faintest tickling touch between two forms and invite the penetration of another body into their holes and folds. *Abakan 29* (1968) is pelty and pachydermal – a heavy, beastly, bodily thing, all tubes and boneless weight. In its gravitational sag, it is a fibrous counterpart to Marisa Merz's *Untitled (Living Sculpture)* (1966), which likewise evokes an abstracted body. Where Merz's cool, slumping aluminium coils speak of industrial architecture, modernity and the future, Abakanowicz's suspended woven sculptures are the living kin of an ancient lineage. They converse with the flax shrouds that wrapped the dead at Çatalhöyük; the Iceman's grass cape frozen for 5,000 years in an Alpine glacier; the cloth, mats, sandals, cords, and baskets woven from cotton, agave, bark, and leaf fibre preserved in the dry heat of Cueva El Gallo in modern day Mexico.

The hands that wove these objects would have understood *Abakan 29* and *Red* (1981) and the processing of fibre, application of colour and flowing sequences of movements that went into their construction. They would have understood these woven objects in relation to the body, but also as materials that derived from and in some ways also resembled the growing world. Out in the forest, tree trunks are rarely the chestnut brown they appear in children's books but tend to muter shades, from the pale silver of beech bark to the stormy grey brown of a gnarled oak. *Abakan 29* is the slate colour of a wet winter woodland. *Red* is ‘red’ as it would have been understood in Medieval Europe, before a word existed for orange – the colour of saffron, egg yolks, the Magdalene's flowing hair, sunset over an autumn forest.

The leaf photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe are portraits rather than nature studies – individual, isolated, artfully lit, exposed to scrutiny. Where the human body is often seen through his lens as an abstracted, faceless composition of bulges and curves, textures and shadows, these leaves are allowed their particularity. (Hello leaf, welcome. Let us have a conversation.) They have attitude. His phonetic namesake, the maple, leans to the left as though cocking its head at us. The cranberry bush leaf looms like a cartoon vampire. The slight bowing of each surface is given dramatic weight by Mapplethorpe's fiercely directed lighting. Just as when he photographs a forearm or other tensed appendage, he emphasises the firm lacing of veins that pattern the flesh.

Mapplethorpe's still lives and flowers can be inviting, suggestive, even titillating. He photographs the rippling marble of sculptures, tulips reaching to touch as though for a kiss, stiff Anthuriums with thrusting spadix, fleshy cala lilies. In January of 1987 Sam Wagstaff – Mapplethorpe's patron and long-term companion – died of AIDS-related pneumonia (Mapplethorpe himself had been diagnosed with AIDS the previous year). Shot in the autumn of 1987, it is hard not to read feelings of mortality in Mapplethorpe's leaf photographs, to see them as loving examinations of bodies in their dying glory.

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As animals, we hold much in common with plants: our veins, our need for water and nourishment, our individual vulnerability, our dependence on symbiotic bacterial relationships, our slow patterns of migration, even, as it turns out, our ability to communicate. Yet there is something uncanny to the vegetable world that has rendered the alien marriage of fauna and flora (or funga) a mainstay of the modern dystopia, from *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) to *In Ascension* (2023). We are wary of algal intelligence, the pathfinding of slime moulds, the shrubby

urge to unstoppable growth, the ruthlessness strangulation that occurs in the struggle for resources.

For millennia humans have harvested, cultivated, bred, modified and hybridised plants as sources of food and construction materials, as well as beauty. An illusion of mastery emerged in Western Europe during the Enlightenment – not only were plants now subject to naming, cataloguing and categorisation, but the landscape itself became available for improvement. During the decade the French decorative painter Jean-Baptiste Pillement worked in London in the mid 18th century, the landscape designer Lancelot 'Capability' Brown was at the height of his fame, busy 'perfecting' the landscapes surrounding Britain's grandest houses in accordance with a painterly Italianate aesthetic. Kew Gardens was established in 1759, and botanic samples and species were gathered from Britain's colonial territories around the world: South Africa, the West Indies, Australasia. Exotic flora was a source of contemporary fascination. During his time in London, Pillement published a collection of etchings of fantastical plants in the 'oriental' style - *Recueil de differentes Fleurs de Fantasie dans le goût chinois* (1760) – many of which were used in wallpaper and textile designs.

Working on *Flowers, Birds and Fantasies* (2024) Cummings has looked to Pillement's rococo designs, constructing a swooping floral landscape that shares their wild excesses and impracticalities while denuding them of their colourful flamboyance. The fantastical flora and perfected landscapes of Pillement and Brown spoke of a perceived separation between humans and the natural world – and indeed of humanity's supposed dominance. In working with unfired clay, Cummings removes any suggestion of permanence, longevity and order. For all their beauty, these finely wrought forms are not works for an era of supposed dominance, but of insecurity: there is a suggestion that they have invaded the space, are somehow the hybrid product of plants and the built environment.

Many of Mapplethorpe's flower photographs draw on restrained and artfully balanced ikebana arrangements, but *Tiger Lily* (1987) instead has a calculated awkwardness. A short-stemmed frond of lily heads pokes out of the top of a frosted white vase that looks like an outsized wineglass filled with milk. The lilies emerge in a froth of frenzied movement above the smooth artifice of their globular container, as though they had somehow wriggled free from it and are making their escape. Aesthetically, the 1980s were an era of high artifice: airbrushed graphics, Memphis furniture, sheeny textiles, bright plastic. Mapplethorpe was a native New Yorker, and these are flowers of the city: what else was this child of no landscapes meant to evoke but modern artifice? Hybridised, factory farmed, plastic wrapped for supermarket buckets, the lily is also a funeral flower, the sweet dominance of its scent founded on the rank base note of the cemetery.

Nine years old when the Second World War broke out, Abakanowicz passed the adventuresome years of her childhood on her family's forest estate in central Poland. As an adult working from a modern building in Warsaw in the 1960s, this was where her mind turned: "Mentally, I was still in Polish forests in the Polish country which I love in an extremely strong way because I know every end, I know every leaf, I know every piece of grass… This is my world and I never got out of it since my childhood." The forest is, explicitly, a reference for one of her grandest installations *Bois le Duc* (The Duke's Wood, 1970) yet in their soft warmth, her woven hangings remain suggestive of the body too. They invite a total vision of the forest that is not simplistically a place of trees but of life in general, in its great diversity: plants, animals, fungi, bacteria in a rich co-existence. You, in the forest, are also part of the forest.

Our relationship to the vegetable world is of the mind as well the body. In plants we find not only echoes of our physical selves but also way-markers through which we feel our way backwards through the structure of memories. From the decadent excess of lilies on a coffin, through the damp mycelial tang of settling autumn leaves, past the jarring softness of hothouse blooms in the hard-edged city, through the warm ardour of roses in a summer garden, all the way to the safe darkness of the forest.

1. Yoko Ogawa, *The Memory Police* (1994) Translated from the Japanese by Stephen Snyder (Vintage, 2020) p.47

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