

On the Autonomy of Objects

The genre of portraiture was at the centre of Véronique Ducharme's first sustained experiments with the photographic medium. Exclusively picturing people with whom she was closely acquainted, she used the genre not to record the outward traces of individual identities but to capture moments of quiet intimacy shared with her sitters. Ducharme's early portrait series, which spans the years 2005-2007, is dominated by subjects that seem lost in a state of introspective self-examination. All taken with ambient light and in bare domestic settings, these images communicate a calculated stillness that is imbued with emotion, softly vibrating beneath the surface.

Ducharme's exploration of portraiture as an expressive tool continued in the following years, yet was significantly altered in a group of works that the artist now considers transitional. While still photographing loved ones in domestic interiors, Ducharme began to actively conceal her sitters by covering their bodies – and especially their heads – with various objects close at hand. Overlain mostly with soft, comforting items such as duvets, pillows, or balloons, her subjects appear simultaneously hidden and shielded from the world; their identities masked in exchange for an overall sense of safety. Acquiring a heightened performative dimension, these acts of portraiture metamorphose human subjects into living, ephemeral sculptures created and documented by the artist.

The fruits of this exploratory group of works came to bear in her two following series, which do away both with human subjects and private interiors, and instead focus on what can be described as the residual evidence of human presence apparent in objects. Turning her camera especially towards pieces of clothing (coats, shirts, dresses, pantyhose, etc.) that were either found or had belonged to people having had an impact on her life, Ducharme sought to recreate, in carefully orchestrated studio shots, the embodiment of objects by humans. In similar ways, the series *Les choses perdues* and *Armours*, both from 2010, translate this search through a precise method: items of clothing were carefully arranged and deposited by Ducharme, who would then photograph them in the instant before they collapsed to the ground. Portraits of evaporating presence, these series can also be said to attest to a desire to investigate the symbolic potency of objects – above and beyond their association with human life.

These experiments with objects led the artist to develop a deep interest in otherness, or in what is external to the supposedly coherent and hermetic Self. Inspired by the theories of object oriented ontology, a perspective which at its core questions the human-centric bias of traditional Western philosophy, Ducharme began to look for ways of working that would allow things outside of herself to be given more weight and be allowed a greater degree of agency. Her following two series, *Portraits of the Night* and *Mystology*, from 2011, attempt to diminish her subjective role as an image-maker by exploring the life forms found in nature. Although resulting in different types of imagery (the photographs from *Portraits of the Night* can be called landscapes, whereas those from *Mystology* are quasi-scientific studies of fungi), both series stem from extended night walks in the Laurentian forest and constitute homages to nature as itself a living, breathing entity.

Pursuing her exploration of the life of the forest, Ducharme went on to produce *Encounters*, a cleverly choreographed installation that uses three 35mm slide projectors. Completed over 2012-2013, the installation is a slide show that intermittently displays photographs taken with hunting cameras that are triggered by the movement of approaching wildlife. For this project, it seems, the artist wished to remove herself entirely from the photographic act, instead choosing to let these automatic cameras depict animals as they appear in the absence of human consciousness. As opposed to the two previous series, which are the visual result of her own ambulations through the forest, *Encounters* offers viewers the semblance of a direct connection with nature. Providing us with a rare glimpse into what happens when no one is around, this work effectively confirms that life does indeed carry on without us.

In her new work, a series wherein Ducharme actively seeks out and records the masses of objects that populate our urban existence, from the things that city dwellers discard on sidewalks to those shopkeepers arrange in window displays, the artist's fascination with inanimate objects is once more apparent. Capturing ephemeral found sculptures created by unknown hands, these images bring forth a central aspect of Ducharme's conception of the world, which has perhaps been there all along: that the human species is surrounded by other forms of life, whether or not these are actually living. Objects have a presence of their own, and the space they take up increases with the number of throwaway, largely worthless goods that are mass-produced, consumed and discarded daily. These objects, Ducharme seems to warn, need to be reckoned with, lest they take over the Earth as they would in the plot of a 1950s B movie. There is something alluring in the things that Ducharme photographs, yet there is also something eerie, precisely because her particular gaze draws out the unexpected humanity of non-human beings. By putting people and things on a level playing field, Ducharme prompts viewers to wonder who, in the end, will be victorious.

Zoë Tousignant, 2014