Walking Poets

Wordsworth and Bashō: Walking Poets
Art Editions North

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CHRISTOPHER MCHUGH

28. Flotsam and Jetsam (Portmanteau)

2014

Porcelain, terracotta, soda glass, mixed media
120 x 60 x 50 cm

McHugh’s work responds to themes of memory and the ephemerality of the human condition in the work of both Bashō and Wordsworth. While Bashō often revisited ruins and other sites of communal memory in his poetry, Wordsworth was concerned that human endeavour—both monuments and works of literature—were at risk of destruction through catastrophe and would be outlasted by nature. Both poets were also interested in uncovering for posterity the marginalised histories of everyday folk (the flotsam and jetsam) they met on the road.

Similarly, throughout much of his ceramic work McHugh evokes potentially overlooked narratives and materialises that which otherwise might remain absent. ‘Flotsam and Jetsam (Portmanteau)’ is an installation piece consisting of hundreds of mainly slipcast and press-moulded ceramic components. By combining durable ceramic elements with an ephemeral, reworkable mode of presentation, the ‘scarred’ porcelain fragments in the installation occupy an ambivalent position somewhere between absence and presence, manifesting a sense of enduring loss and melancholia. Blades of grass made from soda glass grow through the ceramic assemblage, suggesting the endurance of nature over culture.

The installation title references Wordsworth’s portmanteau suitcase which is on display in Dove Cottage and alludes to Bashō’s ‘The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel’. A portmanteau is also a word formed through the combination of two or more other words, resulting in a new meaning. This piece synthesises something of the essence of both poets, repackaging their words into a new object with contemporary resonances. It is inspired by verses 68–92 of Wordsworth’s The Ruined Cottage and a haiku written by Bashō when he visited the abandoned castle at Hiraizumi in 1689 (see figure 24).
Flotsam and Jetsam (Portmanteau), installation shot
Flotsam and Jetsam (Permainian), installation shot

Flotsam and Jetsam (Permainian) (detail)
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

29. The Ruined Cottage
1799 (and later)
Hand of Dorothy Wordsworth
Courtesy of the Wordsworth Trust

This manuscript, one of two red leather bound notebooks used simultaneously in the late 1790s and early 1800s, was used mainly for fair copies of earlier drafts of poems. The earliest drafts of 'The Ruined Cottage' date from 1797 when the Wordsworths were living at Racedown in Dorset; this version was to see further revisions before being published in 1814 as part of Wordsworth's longest poem, The Excursion.