

Douglas Gordon (born 1966)
Scotland

Private Passions 2011

digital c-print
The Artist and Studio lost but found

We begin our journey with Douglas Gordon's *Private Passions*, 2011, a work that evokes ritual, religiosity, exuberance, pain, endurance, wantonness, self-punishment – excess. A kind of perversion of a piece that Milton might have found symptomatic of the isolationist malaise and corruption he cautioned against. And one that continues the tradition of agony and ecstasy within the visual canon of Western art.

As is the case with much of Gordon's work, salvation and sinning are conjoined concepts in this photograph with its ejaculatory allusion. The molten wax – excruciatingly spilling itself on the clutching hand – must be suffered in order to keep the flame of faith aloft and burning.

The serenity and transcendent deliverance of the soft glowing candle – reminiscent of the ethereal, illuminated candle presences of German artist Gerhard Richter – has been debased and corrupted by Gordon who makes a deliberate double entendre with this work, too hot to handle.

Kate Daw (1965–2020)

Australia

Katherine Mansfield

The Voyage, 1921 2020

from: *Love, Work (prelude, aftermath, everyday)*

water based pigment on found door panels and Indian calico

Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne

Kate Daw's works exist in the in-between. Between text and image, painting and print, sculpture and object; between art and life. Hers was a practice open and porous to those things that drift into the midst of looking, thinking, reading and imagining.

For many years Daw made her 'Voices' works – small novel-sized canvases with typewritten texts often coupled with a painted or printed image. In particular, but not exclusively, Daw uses the voices of modern female writers. She is drawn to the worlds created by Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Zelda Fitzgerald and others. This collaboration is a knowing gesture of asserting the feminine unashamedly, giving value to that world of interiority and thought. Daw loves the details and things in between and to the side of something monumental – flowers, china, tapestry, chinz – the decorative things that creep from the art into life. The little, incidental stories of life.

In her works she is drawn to dining rooms, living spaces, domestic sites, gardens, flowers and the inner ruminations of protagonists who are poised at a moment. Invariably her works encounter the 'modern', an era Daw finds useful in its exploration of a world in flux as it moves from the elaborate sensibility of Victorian times to the crisper, more experimental tautness of a world accelerating and fracturing across wars and places in which small occurrences and momentary thoughts quieten the pace.

Threaded through *All That Was Solid Melts* is Daw's last series of works. For this series she enlisted the words of Katherine Mansfield, EM Forster, Muriel Sparks, Iris Murdoch, John Le Carré and Virginia Woolf. Daw moves us from a place of embarkation and bomb sites, to places of cloister – caves and temples. She has us settle momentarily at a kitchen sink, wanders us through a blitzed house and contemplates the breaking of dawn. These are singular snippets, thoughts and moments accompanied by the ever-resilient blossom of that hardy domestic flower – the geranium – and a ruined castle. Daw's works, loving and luxuriating in the details, indicate the life ongoing, even while ruined and ravaged by circumstances.

Franz Sturtzkopf (1852–1927)

Germany

The Hermit circa 1876

oil on canvas

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

gift of Isidore Alexander, 1891

During the 19th century a struggle between hedonism and asceticism occupied the minds of German thinkers. Many literary figures and moral philosophers wrote polemics on the necessity of self-sacrifice – notably Arthur Schopenhauer, who looked to the teachings of the Desert Fathers of Christianity seeking deliverance through following the example of Jesus in the wilderness.

Schopenhauer promoted the idea of a life lived by negated desire based on the premise that emotional and physical longings could never be fulfilled, so one must embrace life without them – enacting Stoicism.

The figure of the ‘hermit’ appeared as a character in German literature and poetry as an example of an extreme adherence to the ideals of asceticism framed by Schopenhauer’s notions. The character of the ‘hermit’ was also an ‘exhibit’ in the manufactured fantasy landscapes of the English aristocracy, which featured artificially created grottos. Hired help sat out their solitary and meditating days to the delight of wandering well-heeled visitors.

Franz Sturtzkopf’s hermit is less a sideshow character than an every-hermit: a quietly pensive character who has thrown away the trappings of a hedonistic or social life for one of seclusion, solitariness, study and sacrifice. He is accompanied by a skull – an object of the *vanitas* – which alludes to the unavoidable mortality of human existence. A mortality to be accepted as fated, divined by God.

Sturtzkopf paints in a realist manner, a style which had gained some enthusiastic followers, especially in Düsseldorf where exposure to Gustave Courbet’s realist works caused excitement in the early 1800s. We see considerable skill in the handling of flesh, the corporeal sagging, the effects of age and privation in Sturtzkopf’s work. His textures of fur, cloth and ceramic are equally well-handled.

He was pleased with his effort and *The Hermit*, circa 1876 was sent to the Academy of Berlin in 1877. There it was met with considerable hostility, being described by one critic as an example of ‘atrocious realism’. With its mellow palette and sombre background *The Hermit* provides a mood of resignation rather than joy. To some this might seem an image of quiet, devotional contemplation. To others it could appear more like some form of puritanical purgatory and existential glumness – feelings with which those who have struggled during isolation might find sympathy and recognition.