

The Curator's Room

Visceral Reflections from within the Museum

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“The museum and the living artist, so poignantly interdependent, must keep a wary distance. This means strain and altercation, but that is the natural order of things, a check and balance”.

(Zolberg 1992)

Prologue

In the way of museums, certain things have been collected and assembled for a display, a truth, in the form of a private room in which resides the dream world of the curator. Then, as the visual expression of this inner space deepens, they are carefully taken apart, always with respect for the original. Yet the work is not shaped by the hand of a conservator destined to abandon the imagination in favour of a trail of physical evidence. Nor does it reflect the conventional rationalist sensibilities of a museum worker who, by suppressing a poetic understanding of the world is confined by “cold language” (Frame 1992 p.45) and remains caught inextricably in the web of colonial thinking.

Here the imagination is truth (Einzig 1996) and an understanding of the nature of this inner space the key to the locked door. The Anthropologist and the Archaeologist, indeed a whole host of disciplinary specialists may come knocking, but it is the artist that gains access to the curatorial spirit. Compelled as much by a love of the museum profession as a crisis of European consciousness (Spivak in Harasym 1990), objects are assembled for an inner journey to a place where shadow and sunlight chase each other across the landscape (McQueen 2000). This is the dialectic space of both curator and artist, of the rational and the irrational, of inside and outside, and of disciplinary devotion and betrayal.

Viscera

Devotion

Tread softly into the curator's room so that we may take a quiet journey through the breath of conversations past. Here there is companionship and a hint of tobacco succours the air, which is redolent with something rotting by the sink. On the far wall are windows for gentle reverie, tiny drawers for warmth and protection and shelves for open display. A walk-in cupboard is home to a profusion of books and papers, generously stacked for constant reference. A white-coated presence is intent at a long bench.

Betrayal

Draw near into the shadow land of the Great Halls of Man and Nature where past and present sit in uneasy silence, awaiting adjudication. You falter, hesitant to enter this place without armour. A thick mist dims your vision and veils your perception to the point where glasses must be worn for spiritual protection. In this, however, your finest hour, you escape supplication, seeking refuge within. And in the stillness you find a new reality, an order from the heart.