

Claire Morgan - The Slow Fire

‡ A Vibrant Silence

‘If you turn outside yourself - to the birds and animals and the quickly changing places where they live - you may hear something beyond words. Even humans can find silence, if they can bring themselves to forget the silence they are looking for.’ (John Gray, *The Silence of Animals*)

When you see Claire Morgan’s monumental sculptural work and her drawings in a gallery for the first time it’s possible to experience a new and vibrant form of silence. It is difficult not to be struck by the power of the work’s fragile yet imperious stillness. There is a strange majesty in the silent gaze of the two frozen birds of prey who sit unnaturally atop the suspended cubes of black and white polythene fragments in **Sentry I & II** (2013), a playful melancholy in the cat’s observation of the Barn Owl sealed within a suspended globe of blue polythene scraps in **The Owl and the Pussycat** (2013), and a sense of sadness at the muntjac deer’s futile wanderings in pursuit of a flutter of butterflies hidden deep within the wedge formed by scraps of orange polythene of **If You Go Down to the Woods Today** (2013). The desire to linger silently in the presence of these mysterious sculptures is irresistible.

The sculptural work, consisting of seeds, leaves, coloured polythene, or flies mounted on weighted nylon threads, is delicately arranged in complex three dimensional geometrical forms. Often, as in **Throe** (2010) or **Bound** (2013), these forms serve as frames for the introduction of taxidermic animals suddenly abstracted from their natural habitat. The ceaseless flow of time and place that marks the life of all living beings is halted with an acute poetic minimalism. The stillness produces an almost impenetrable sense of mystery. Each sculpture choreographs a strange imaginary confrontation between animality and the artifice of culture. These weird meetings bring the wounding severance of humankind from nature back to the surface. The disastrous consequences of our ongoing sublimation and degradation of nature through religious dogma, ideological obsessions, and technological possession are repeatedly enacted through acts of collision. However, Morgan’s sculptures resist being consigned to mere relics carrying determinate cultural meanings about environmental abasement or exploitation; instead they resonate with a vibrant poetic silence and animal intensity. An elusive private alchemy is being repeatedly worked out, one that suggests concrete forms and narratives whilst always remaining fragile and poetically allusive.

‘In the sculptures there are very precise things - solids, eternal geometrical shapes (which are being interacted with by animals and nature) - which do not really exist anywhere in nature. They are just constructed from lots of small ephemeral things - seeds, flies, leaves, plastic - in order to provide an illusion of something solid or concrete. However, ultimately they are neither solid or concrete. The pieces are, in fact, much closer to the chaos of things than they might appear. They are fragile and can be easily destroyed. Even those that look like very strong solid shapes are actually fragile and precarious in some way.’ (Claire Morgan)

Morgan has fashioned an original form of eco-poetic sculpture as a way for us to reflect upon our continued dislocation from nature and what it might mean to dwell upon the earth in this time of emergency. By coming to inhabit the enigmatic spaces of this eco-poetic art we are offered an opportunity to affectively experience the aberrant discordance between man and animal and to begin to imagine what it might be like to live differently on earth.

As well as serving as reminders of our dislocation, her sculptures also confront us with a sense of our deepest insecurities and fears amidst the mortal impermanence of things.

‘My work is related to my own processes of coming to terms with understanding our relations with animals and with my own feelings of discomfort at everything in life being impermanent. All of my work eventually leads back to ideas about life, death, and the human condition. We are never really secure in any way, yet we yearn for the security of permanence in our lives.’ (Claire Morgan)

Her drawings, such as **Dptych** (2010), **A Red Sky** (2011) and **Down Time** (2011) record initial ideas and plans for the sculptures, and are intimately related to the visceral process by which many of these sculptures are made. The paper itself is used as a working surface upon which the taxidermic animals are prepared. An intimate affective association is formed between the drawings and the sculptures through the traces of an animal’s blood and other visceral fluids recorded upon the paper’s surface. The physical processes by which the bodies of animals are handled and prepared for the sculptural work becomes much more tangible in the drawings than they do in the sculptures.

In sculptural work such as **Gathering** (2013) or **Throe** (2010) it is as if Morgan has managed to capture tiny organic substances autonomously tracing out some imponderably delicate intervention into Brownian motion. She appears to have preserved the impossible beauty of geometrically composed particles caught and rendered motionless in a momentary shaft of sunlight, as so memorably observed by Lucretius.

"Observe what happens when sunbeams are admitted into a building and shed light on its shadowy places. You will see a multitude of tiny particles mingling in a multitude of ways... their dancing is an actual indication of underlying movements of matter that are hidden from our sight... It originates with the atoms which move of themselves. Then those small compound bodies that are least removed from the impetus of the atoms are set in motion by the impact of their invisible blows and in turn cannon against slightly larger bodies. So the movement mounts up from the atoms and gradually emerges to the level of our senses, so that those bodies are in motion that we see in sunbeams, moved by blows that remain invisible." (Lucretius, 'On the Nature of Things')

Amidst the precisely arranged regiments of bluebottles, seeds, leaves, or polythene scraps, in a gesture repeated across much of her work, Morgan introduces a taxidermic animal. These are almost always familiar threshold animals, animals that have come to share our space, both in rural and urban environments. Nocturnal, subterranean, or aerial, these are all animals that dwell, often invisibly, at a liminal point of contact with humans – foxes, owls, rabbits, hares, deer, mice, hedgehogs, herons, gulls, butterflies, flies, hawks, swallows, rooks and gulls. In **Bound** (2013) a carrion crow has inquisitively placed its head in a dense ball of multicoloured polythene fragments, in **If you Go Down To The Woods Today** (2013) a Muntjac deer has become totally enclosed, along with a flutter of butterflies, in a slab of suspended orange polythene fragments, in **The Colossus** (2012) a mute swan has become completely engulfed in a vast suspended globe of multicoloured polythene pieces, and in **Fantastic Mr Fox** (2008) the fox is about to be entombed by the giant descending cube of suspended black polythene fragments. Each of these creatures appear disastrously entangled and trapped at the threshold.

On the one hand, the fragility and vulnerability of the animal’s submersion into the detritus of the human world is woundingly destructive, but on the other there is a simultaneous effort at reconciliation, recovery, re-connection, communion, and renewal. Morgan’s work represents a vital refuge for vulnerable manifestations of nature; it creates a space for negotiating new ways for nature

to become visible and expressive in our human world. Animals are constantly brought into proximity and visibility, sometimes disastrously captured and held in moments of petrified presence by the delicate geometrical frames of seeds, flies, and plastic. Yet their unguarded closeness and visibility renders their essential distance and difference more acute. Held there in suspension in moments of inquisitiveness, struggle, fall and death, they become strange to us again.

Often the suspended geometrical forms create spaces where things can emerge into presence and radically different sensory events can happen. In many of her sculptures, the animals enter the delicate frames only to become frozen in time, as if suddenly under a spell that renders them lifeless and perilously still. The forms traced out in space suspend the everyday forces of gravity and the chaotic processes of change, becoming transcendent places where the ceaseless movement of all nature is held at bay. It is through coming into contact with these zones that the animals become weightless, lifeless and immobile. They seem to be suspended from any further organic degradation and corruption. Spaces created by the globes, cubes and rectangular prisms manifest a sudden equilibrium in the ceaseless change of life. Morgan repeatedly experiments with these spaces, producing couplings between abstract geometrical form and contingent animality, organic and non-organic material, preservation and decay. Consider **Pedestal** (2011), where a heron appears gently poised mid-air upon carefully stacked rectangular beds of dandelion seeds, **Interference III** (2013), where a carrion crow is overwhelmed by a dense flurry of torn fragments of plastic, the desperate flight-path of the trapped swallow in the **The Air That We Breathe** (2013), or **Throe** (2010), where two rooks in the midst of conflict are caught and frozen mid-battle within an enormous globe of thistle seeds. In each of these works it is as if the animals have been transported into a lifeless realm, where everything has been turned to stone. We have become witnesses to the day the earth stood still.

In other works the movement of the animals prior to the catastrophe of being petrified is dramatically figured, none more so than in the recent installation **Here is the End of All Things** (2011). In this work four separate cubes (three composed of thistle seeds and one of bluebottles) are suspended in a line. The flight of a barn owl is traced by the hollow path of its bursting through two of the seed cubes, with its progress ultimately impeded by the third cube where it now is forever suspended, wings outstretched, never to reach the fourth. Again, in **Tracing Time** (2007) a lifeless wren has fallen through a dense cuboid of suspended fragments of torn polythene, its path to doom traced through the floating fragments of plastic. In **Life Span** (2013) the final arrested flight of a greenfinch is traced through a vast suspended structure of wildflower seeds, or in **Opening** (2013) where a chaffinch's sudden vertical descent splits the suspended globe of dandelion seeds.

In other sculptures the proximity to the geometric frames has an even more catastrophic effect upon animals, ranging from the subtle effects of reification enacted upon the sitting fox in **Hangover** (2013) which is frozen below a dense suspended cube of bluebottle flies, the head-on collision with the earth perpetrated on the tawny owl in **Captive** (2008), and the devastating impact of the carrion crow with the suspended globe of thistle seeds in **On Impact** (2013). In these sculptures the animal's entry into the geometrical zone created by the suspended flies, seeds, polythene, or leaves brings about a catastrophic loss of movement and subsequent crashing to earth. A sudden and hyperbolic return of gravity renders the animals too heavy to move or be able to support themselves on the wing any further.

Regardless of whether it is through a subtraction of gravity or its sudden fatal intensification, the sculptures dramatise a moment of catastrophic confrontation between radically different forces, between the human world and nature. The frozen presence of bluebottle flies, whether arranged on their own in geometrical regiments in sculptures like **Heart of Darkness I & II** (2012) **Gathering**

(2013) and **Speaking Volumes** (2013), or when they provide cages, resting places, or platforms in **While You Were Sleeping** (2009), **Apart at the Seam** (2013), or **Little Death** (2013), suggest an interruption of the organic process. Through feeding on decomposing organic material, flies are the agents of organic change. They are also metamorphic creatures (involving the cycle of the egg, maggot, larvae and fly). Morgan's work arrests this most basic transformative process in order to nullify the fly's role in the ceaseless process of organic change. In **While You Were Sleeping** (2009), the dormant figure of a red squirrel rests in mid-air upon a thick rectangular bed of suspended flies, and in **Little Death** (2013) a diminutive blue tit rests gently upon a cuboid bed of densely packed bluebottle flies.

Apart from flies, Morgan utilises wildflower seeds and inorganic plastics in the shape of torn polythene fragments. Both objects suggest further cessations to the natural cycle; the polythene through its resistance to biodegrading, and the floating seeds that will never germinate. The overall effect of placing abstracted and petrified animals into direct proximity with geometrically regimented flies, polythene, or seeds, is to remind us of our own proximity to the ongoing process of death and renewal. However, In sculptures such as **Apart at the Seam** (2013) Morgan intervenes to magically freeze the process, to delicately interrupt it and to hold it at bay. Whilst death is undoubtedly an important feature, sometimes explicitly so in **Little Death** (2013), **On Impact** (2013), **Here is an End to All Things** (2011), or **Terminal** (2012), to view her work just from this perspective would be a mistake. Morgan's intentions are more complex. By deliberately creating a dramatic hiatus in the endlessly transformative organic process the sculptures enable us to inhabit an abstract silent moment and to see further. They allow us to experience something else which is usually invisible, covered over by the ceaseless movement of things. Morgan extends an invitation to nature, sets a lure for it to enter the frame and become visible for an instant. This instant of visibility is quite different from the usual forms of visibility produced by the familiar cultural nets thrown out by religion, technology, civilisation, economy, and contemporary ways of living. Instrumentalism, materialism, and consumerism nullify the vibrant dynamism of animality and the natural environment. This disaster is evident in Morgan's sculptures, yet they are not restricted to monumentalising it, and should not be reduced to such.

Through stillness and silence her work restores the implicit vibrancy to nature that has been so systematically subtracted from it. At the simplest level her sculptures exist in order to intensify our overall sense of life. The work should ultimately be seen as profound expressions of existential renewal. The most fragile hope imaginable for a different kind of future is injected into the present. Her work extends a gesture of welcome to nature, an opportunity to construct new alliances with the liminal animals that share our world. In the instant of contact repeatedly configured in her sculptures a new form of alliance is visible. Arguably, it is by virtue of an implied catastrophe that the work succeeds in presenting such an intense and original view of life. This is the work's allotropic quality, where it is capable of existing in at least two distinct forms at one and the same time - the petrified lifelessness of death and the constrained energy of life: **Here is an End to All Things** (2011), **If You Go Down to the Woods Today** (2013), **Terminal** (2012) and **The Weight of the World** (2013). The quiet materiality of the sculptures calls attention to their inert state as well as their vibrant transformative quality.

Through the tension created by its stillness and silence, the work vibrates with a new form of intense energy. By arresting the ceaseless flux of life into complex and abstract snapshots the sculptures suggest a barely concealed vibrant energy. This enigmatic dynamic is acutely tangible in a sculpture like **Gone to Seed** (2011) where the carrion crow's disastrous fall through the giant dome of thistle seeds has had the effect of splitting it apart. Paradoxically, the stillness of the work, the uncanny way

that the crow's catastrophic fall has been recorded and arrested, is the key to understanding the way Morgan is effectively opening up an entirely new and vital sense of life in all of its vibrant rich becoming.

Questions of how we as human beings are implicated in the work are also evident. These range from the way human culture is signified through the choice of elaborate geometrical forms, the artificial detritus, the intimate way the different materials are handled and treated, through to the often playful titles given to the sculptures. Literal, and sometimes abundant, traces of the human handling of the animals is recorded on the surface of her drawings in the form of animal blood and other fluids, as in the drawings **If You Go Down to the Woods Today** (2013), **Bound** (2013) and **Hangover** (2013). In her drawings the essential intimacy of the taxidermic process is made visible alongside different visualisations and perspectives of the realised sculptural form, revealing a further layer in the implication of the human in its relation to the animal. The titles of the sculptures are also often deliberately ironic, playful and loaded with multiple cultural references, such as **The Tears of a Clown** (2013), **Fantastic Mr Fox** (2009), **Brief Encounter** (2013), **Making a Killing** (2013), **If You Go Down to the Woods Today** (2013), **Triple Penetration** (2012), and **Heart of Darkness** (2012). Deliberate cultural allusions, suggestive vernacular expressions, and playful phrases allow us to more easily project ourselves back into the complex spaces opened up by the work, and to begin to contemplate our humanity and our place in the world within a broad context of animality.

Morgan's artworks establish the work of overcoming our deep loneliness through producing a new communion with the animal. Often within modernity it is as if we have been fatally abstracted from all other organic life. Our growing inability to form any lines of communication and contact with the exteriority of organic life, together with our contemporary hubris regarding our species autonomy and power, leaves us catastrophically lonely. We have turned away from an open communion with animality – both from the animals we are as well as from the ones they are. When we are this solipsistically lonely it is as if the world has become totally lost to us, we merely exist as ghostly abstracted parasites on the surface of the planet. Morgan's sculptural communions are part of an effort towards an ecological restoration enacted through expressive poetic acts rather than simply intellectual or literal political acts. This new communion resists traditional theological conceptions of animality and those posited by contemporary capitalism, both of which define the relationship to the animal in homogeneously instrumental and hierarchical ways. The task is to try and think of the relationship as an alliance, as a new kind of kinship and as an affective realisation of our shared substance. In this sense, Morgan's work is a rare and extraordinary exercise in poetic utopian imagination where a new shared place for the human and animal sparks into being. Her sculptural poetry profoundly disrupts our existing patterns of thinking, feeling and being; it performs a vital role. We are summoned by the work into a new and vibrant form of silence which allows for a realisation that this renegotiation of the relationship between the human and the animal has to happen if we are to avoid complete catastrophe and annihilation. In the deep silence of their material presence we must become open to their affective moments, and to, in the ancient words of Lucretius, being 'moved by the blows that remain invisible'.