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**‘Descriptor, Bernice Donszelmann’, Five Years Gallery, London
6th June 2015 – 14th June 2015**

Reviewed by Dr Catherine Ferguson, School of FAHACS, University of Leeds

‘...If getting from one to two is so hard, I asked myself, how shall I ever get from zero to one? From nowhere to somewhere; it seemed to demand a miracle each time.’ (Coetzee, [2012]: 249)

The small boy in Coetzee’s novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, refuses the logic, and the vision that this brings, which combines an apple and an apple to make two apples. He sees instead the empty space between. This empty space is the gap or chaos which, not seen through the blindfold of a good and common sense, is necessary, as Deleuze says in *What is Philosophy?*, (Deleuze and Guattari, [1994]: 204) if we are to overcome cliché and give breath to a different vision.

The visit begins with what looks like a block of social housing but as you get closer the building is more industrial than residential, for these are units for working in rather than living. But once inside the space Donszelmann has created in *Five Years Gallery*, the domestic comes back into mind. This is not the cluttered, overcrowded space that a family might have to squeeze into but one that allows the eye to travel and the mind to wander.

Bed, screen, mirror, window, banner, painting...

Nouns don’t do it though. Moving through the space co-ordinates shift and I am implicated here.

Descriptor

The floor is portable
The path is mutable
My trousers are extendable
The bed is bendable
A hallway is durable
But the ceiling is permeable
A corner is viable
The balcony, pliable
This area is erasable
The hill, replicable
The window is negotiable
A carpet is zippable
The page is traversable
My hair is unattributable
Feet, manoeuvrable
The desk is luminous
My gloves are voluminous
The wall, magnanimous
The door folds, light holds.

Donszelmann (2015)

The gallery space houses, let's say, three individual pieces. In the corridor to the left, just above the floor, parallel to the wall, is a vertical, tall, surface. It's the size of a generous door(way), ceiling height. It's an object though, wrapped in black plastic that is taut, coming apart, shiny, reflecting light. Around the corner, is what could be a bed (but it's too big to fit nicely) or perhaps a Trades Union banner laid low (but it's too big, too heavy to hold up and walk with). A flat horizontal surface with a top and a bottom. What catches the eye is an aluminium, telescopic armature sheathed in its specially made case – it's not commonplace, as if it has a function we don't yet know. Layered fabric on the floor, elevated by, tucked around, the headpiece, and, once again, the sense that this won't look like it does for long; like the wrapper waiting to come off, the fabric has been laid out, like an outfit ready to wear.

The third piece is actually six pieces. Parallel to the wall are planes made from blue groundsheet material, the kind you take camping because it protects things from the elements. This outside is brought inside or perhaps these sheets mark an interface between inside and outside, like a window, a curtain or a painting (a window on the world) or even a screen between one space and another, in other words a vertical panel that invites the viewer to move or slide it across like a Japanese screen. Aluminium fittings provide a frame separating the planes of fabric from the plane of the wall. The fabrication and stitching are purposeful, not arbitrary. Sprayed onto the surface of the 'bed' and onto one of the blue wall pieces is a repeated motif reminiscent of a simple minimalist painting, or is it a depiction or trace of light coming through a window? With a nod, perhaps, to Rauschenberg, a painting becomes a 'flat-bed picture plane' and the horizontal plane of a utilitarian groundsheet is re-orientated to the vertical plane of the wall.

As my attempt at a description implies, the various surfaces bring with them a number of associations. However, although a flash of recognition evokes memories of our lived, bodily experience, and those spaces we occupy every day, it does not last and the vitality of the work seems to lie somewhere else between, perhaps, the architectural surface of the interior floor and wall and the flattened surfaces of the material constructions. It feels right to say that this space in between is animated even though it is an invisible dark space hidden away. These are spaces into which the viewer can project her own corporeal narratives. These are spaces that can be lived but not occupied.

Such a space for living in between is beyond description and recognition and announces itself, not in an act of voluntary memory (which Proust calls 'a memory of the intellect and of the eyes' (de Beistegui, [2013]: 35)) but from the force of involuntary memory, in other words as a memory of feelings. As Benjamin puts it 'only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *memoire involontaire*'. (Benjamin, [1992]:157) As this quotation implies, involuntary memory returns, not a subjective or personal experience from the past that can be named but a moment of difference; a resonance between a present sensation and a past that has yet to be lived.

Is it too much to draw an analogy with the intimacy of the incremental, painted surface made by the touch of the brush/ hand of the artist, and the intimacy of surfaces almost touching or

laying over each other? Donszelmann's long-standing interest in paintings' surface is evident in previous installations as well as in recent essays such as 'Touch Screen' (Donszelmann [2015]: 55-64). This preoccupation is extended here, as Descriptor unfolds a past that we never saw to figure that space between the canvas and the loaded brush. In place of a pictorial plastic space there are what could be described as Duchampian infra-thin spaces. In such spaces motivations and desires originating outside the work find a home in immaterial shadows, through the surface that obscures but which also invites the viewer to lie down, get dressed, pull open the curtains, slide the screen or open the door. Imagined actions and movements that move within the dark, hidden space of the inside in response to an invitation from a sensory world on the outside, a space that is decorative, playful, full of light.

However, these imaginings are, perhaps, no more than fleeting reminiscences of painting's depictive past which returns, not as image or identity, but as sensation. Here the gap demonstrates the incomprehensibility of sensation but it is also the key to a unity whose mystery (but also vitality) lies in what cannot be scrutinised and must be forever hidden. As the surfaces invite us into a space for living, one in which the body might perceive simply what was useful to it in the present, the flatness which confounds use, the solidity that stands in place of the aperture, and the flattened conceptual space that emerge, create a different temporality. This is a temporality in which the past is not hidden from us by the necessities of present demands but returns, actualised through a moment of indeterminacy. In other words the spatial gap is also a temporal gap; one in which involuntary memory forces itself upon us to prise open the continuity of a purposeful present. In Bergsonian language the 'plane of matter' gives way to its double; the virtual plane of the 'unlived'.

But if almost the whole of our past is hidden from us because it is inhibited by the necessities of present action it will find strength to cross the threshold of consciousness in all cases where we renounce the interests of effective action to replace ourselves, so the speak, in the life of dreams. [Bergson, Matter and Memory, quoted in O'Sullivan [2012]: 48]

The intelligence of Donszelmann's installation reveals itself through an attention to detail, fabrication and material. This is not to control the viewer, however, but to entice the viewer close up to the surface to search in its material presence for the answer to its mystery. However, just as the small boy in Coetzee's novel refuses the rational, mathematical world of the sum we find that we follow him, blindfold off, to fall through the gap in the thrall of sensation.

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