THE WORLD IS A NARROW BRIDGE

DRAWINGS BY BEVERLY RESS
dead bird, a withered leaf, a deer bone, a warped root, an amputated limb, a section of a human brain—items that are mesmerizing and quietly unsettling at the same time—these are the kinds of objects at the center of Beverly Ress’s meditations on transitoriness. Like the vanitas still lives of the late Renaissance, her delicate, exquisitely detailed drawings focus on the boundaries between life and death, presence and oblivion.

And like those still life compositions, these images speak both of the inevitability of death and the power of art to transcend that “fact” through the process of representation and contemplation.

The artist’s fascination with in-between states extends to her formal vocabulary. While her choice of media may seem rather restrained and traditional, nothing about her precisely rendered, naturalistic imagery is ever mimetically certain. A painstakingly rendered butterfly wing may be set against the expanse of white paper in a way that makes us wonder if we have ever encountered anything like it before. An amorphous pool of color calls to mind both a monacellular entity and an expanding galaxy. Everything about these “commonplace” images seems both instantly recognizable and utterly new.

This transformation of the ordinary is further enhanced by interventions into the paper itself. In many of these drawings, these interventions consist of deliberate cuts and incisions, often as fine as the lines and colors used for the realistically-rendered motifs. In some of them, the artist takes strips of paper and weaves them into the ground, creating relief-like patterns that penetrate or play against the drawn elements. In other instances, she cuts and pulls away thin sections of the paper and stretches them into boldly sculptural configurations. These interpolations between the two dimensional and the sculptural, between the randomness of the natural and the regularity of the geometric, are self-consciously open-ended, as if to keep us asking: what is this thing I am looking at?

Instead of any given answer, we are merely encouraged to keep looking — quietly, patiently, and attentively. It is through looking alone, be it at the subtle veins of a leaf or the intricate geometry of a tortoise shell, that we can actually begin to appreciate the larger “nature” we often overlook or take for granted in its omnipresence.

The intersection between life, science, and art has preoccupied Ress for much of her career. When she speaks of historic models, she often mentions artists like Albrecht Dürer and his magnificent studies after nature and his parallel inquiry into the geometric underpinnings of the visible world. Yet the “unclassifiable” objects she creates can just as readily call to mind the “wonders” from
Renaissance cabinets of curiosities, the early modern museums in which the natural and the man-made mixed together in ways that defied categories and disciplines of knowledge.

One of the most renowned of these museums belonged to Frederik Ruysch, a seventeenth-century medical doctor in Amsterdam. When the Russian Tsar Peter the Great visited it in 1697, he was so moved by Ruysch’s artful arrangement of anatomical specimens that he bent down and kissed an embalmed infant boy, before purchasing the entire collection and taking it to St. Petersburg.

The story of the embalmed infant feels especially relevant to Ress’s most recent drawings based on specimens from museums of science and medicine. No less delicate and specific than her earlier images of bird wings or foliage, they possess a formal refinement that invites us to linger over each minuscule detail. Instead of recoiling at the realization that we are looking at a section of the human heart preserved in formaldehyde, we become enchanted by the tour-de-force rendering. In a sudden, imperceptible moment of absorption, the macabre becomes beautiful.

This shift in our perception and reception is significantly aided by the amount of blank space around the central figural elements. This emptiness makes us more attentive to what is actually there, and allows us to imagine—if not even reenact—the artist’s own initial focus that led to the creation of these images. In this manner, it functions like the Japanese “ma”—the pause filled with quiet energy found between two temporal or spatial events.

The same idea informs Haiku poetry, where breaks between lines and thoughts force us to focus on the “present” as the only “true” moment and object of the poem. For the seventeenth-century master of this genre, Matsuo Basho, this concentration on a concrete object or phenomenon was a prerequisite for escape from oneself—and thus, for true understanding:

“Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn.”

In a similar vein, Aldous Huxley would speak of the importance of focusing on the mundane as a way of comprehending the “suchness” of things. In his classic work The Doors of Perception, he tells a story about the bewildered novice monk whose Zen teacher tells him that Buddha is “the hedge at the bottom of the garden.” In his comment on this parable, Huxley acknowledges that he was just as lost at this answer, until one day, it became “as evident as Euclid” that Buddha was not only that hedge, but everything else around him, provided that he could look at that “everything” released from the “throttling embrace” of himself.^[1]

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