

For souls to whom effusiveness is easy

Emma Fitts and Kirstin Carlin, The Physics Room

It's Sunday, a bright grey glary Auckland Sunday when your brain sits tight in your temples. It's Sunday and Paul has broken his hand, rolled over the wrong way and broken his hand, and then it's later and we look at the x-rays and feel like crying because who knew it was that easy to break your own hand, and who knew you needed it so much, that even five minutes after you'd broken it you'd be reaching for the keys to drive yourself to hospital. If you are a person who makes things, sculptures or paintings, or even just cups of tea, you realise straight away that having only one hand is just about as bad as having no hands at all. It's Sunday so waiting in the hospital is going to take all day, and maybe tomorrow too, if there's surgery.

Because I've got this other thing on my mind, this thing about porcelain and bone china, because I am thinking of Emma Fitts's artwork which has always reminded me first of bones, then of a slim fractured Brancusi column, and then of an afternoon at Café Oto in Dalston where she first told me about the work, I am more interested in the x-rays than is nice. I want to think about what it means to see your own bones for the first time, and about how a skeleton is the most complex piece of architecture but can be structurally undermined so simply and so suddenly. I want to think about the way that darkness in the x-ray slide is how you turn something inside out, to make it visible.

The point of bone china is its whiteness, its translucence and high tensile strength, which means it can hold its shape in very thin layers. In its traditional formulation it's made of up to 50% bone ash; I had a vegan boyfriend who would not eat from china, it didn't matter how often I told him that New Zealand's ceramic traditions had always been about earthenware, not bones. I'd looked it up. With bone china, the bones are crushed, the gelatine is taken out, and the substance which remains is heated up to 1250°C to become ash. The ash is milled fine, and kaolin (a clay or silicate mineral) is added to heighten its plasticity. It's fired at around 1200°C.

I read this with the x-rays, and the broken hand sitting in the periphery of my mind, and with Emma's artwork, pale poles made out of fine bone china slip, there too. I register a kind of anxiety about them both—the hand of Paul strangely shaped, in a way that you know is wrong without having to compare it to an unbroken hand. The way an ill-punctuated sentence looks wrong. And the longer bones of china, shin-length, which make up Emma's pillar-tall sculptures, and which have had to travel in their separate aching pieces in her hand luggage from London to Singapore, to Auckland, and then to the Physics Room.

It's not just the bones that interest me, it's the gaps too: what exactly is going on in the milky darkneses between finger joints, at the ink-coloured edges of the wrist? And in Emma's work the gap between the top of the work and the ceiling is troubling also; many-jointed, the pillar's top segment must be able to be put in place securely, but the gap is inevitable, a calculated space: the pillar is going to need that too, to stand up. It's also where the work ends, or where it becomes something else. What it's become is a cube of grey oasis used for flower arrangements. Well, used for whatever you need it for. For being exactly the material necessary—the material which abruptly becomes perfect in its absolute necessity—when you need to secure something like this. It's the gap, made material, made substantial, and part of the point.

In Emma's work the translucent whiteness of the bone china is part of the point too. It's in that surface, which shines like teeth and returns the light, ecstatic, as only white surfaces will. You can almost see the kind of attention she has paid to that surface, so that in looking at it we cannot help but borrow the same verb which belongs so particularly to light, to *glance* [off], the line of our looking striking the surface always obliquely and then off, at a reflex angle.

At least—this is what I assume, that is what I see, but my looking at it is done through layers of glass and time—I see it on a computer screen; it has been photographed through the glass in its installation at Window, Auckland. And then there's glass in the Physics Room too: the windows of that space, the glazing on the wall-mounted paintings, the coaster-sized stack of glass tiles at each pillar's base, and two lean slabs of glass which lie cheek down on the floor, and are most visible around their raw green edges. All the surfaces shine, computer screens have made us expert in the language of shine, less adept at understanding density, weight, the texture of materials. I feel the bones of my left hand with my right as I look at the work on the screen.

* * *

For souls to whom effusiveness is easy begins Balzac's 1832 short story *The Purse*. I read it, and then print and re-read it, because I know Emma and Kirstin have, I know it has surfaced in the conversation as they make the work, and because I too am interested in his realism, his careful relationship to all the particulars in a room—I've read something beautiful before which he wrote about wallpaper, which nothing else apart from Joan Didion's writing about wallpaper comes close to—which is not unromantic. Reading his writing is an inimitable kind of looking. I look him up too, Honoré de Balzac, 1799–1850, and read: 'Before and during his career as a writer, he attempted to be a publisher, printer, businessman, critic, and politician; he failed in all of these efforts,' and I look at his full-moon face and think what an extraordinary man to have failed so publically at all these things.

For souls to whom effusiveness is easy... I spend a week, eight days, thinking about this phrase on and off. It's likely a slightly archaic translation, but it's stuck with me like something caught smack on the windshield of my mind. When I think of it I see a walk which is equal parts swing and stride, a high clear brow which looks always wide awake, laughter that makes a perfect bold shape in the air. I start to look for these souls on the street as I walk to work, I know that I will recognise them; I want to know what they talk about. There are none to be found on the pavements of Wellington, perhaps I'll not find them in any of New Zealand's cities. *Effusive*. I list synonyms to find a substitute I am more familiar with—demonstrative, expansive, vociferous, fulsome, unrestrained. They are no better, they feel even less at home here.

Kirstin's paintings are unafraid of the adjective, and looking at them, I begin to read it differently. The impasto topography of their surfaces is a taunt to the sheer face of the screen. And the colours, I don't know if I've seen even all these colours before. Peter said to me yesterday that there are more colours in the world right now than ever before, so many that it's hard to see them all, and looking at these paintings with their terribly wet pinks, their new-born blues and bittersweet greens and muddy borders, I am suddenly aware of how appallingly many colours there are. I can see them mixing at the edges as they are applied, not being as still as a still life should be, making the world

more complicated with their wet and their colour. It seems inevitable that they would press at the surface in this way, that they would demand from paint a whole other dimension.

They have a woman's name, Jan, these paintings, or a man's, if you are looking at them from another side of the world. It makes them seem familiar, or as if you may find them familiar if you look closer; it makes you look for something to hang a likeness on, in the way you search faces at an airport or a party. There are five of them, in a line as straight as a family of fringes across the wall. It's fair to think of them as a family, or a series, all beginning from the same paper print of a Dutch still life which had surfaced in Kirstin's studio. Since then the light source has changed, the weight and intensity of the brushstrokes, but that's where they started. They are domestic in scale, and you think maybe that could be a way to shelve them in your mind, to like them from the safety of distance, contained by a wall which acts as a secondary frame. Yet you are left with that surface, almost more present than the picture they hold out, effusive, as if snatched from the less-noticed edge of a still life.

I recognise effusiveness, finally, in their refusal to simply be either picture or material, refusing to be Jan, or Jan, or brushstrokes or just flowers, to be a painting or paint. The acidic yellow-green of the wall they sit on refuses too, its colour leaking into the air and not leaving the paintings alone either, glowing hungry at their edges. The air is taut with these refusals, composed and, like paintings must be, ready for being looked at. I can't agree with Balzac, I'd like to talk further with him about it at least; effusiveness is never easy, not here.

Abby Cunnane