

The Secret Life of Objects

I grew up in one end of a rambling country house in Hampshire. Built in 1809 over the site of a seventeenth century manor house, its heyday came in the 1930s and '40s under the ownership of the wealthy McKay family. Their more or less weekly social gatherings resembled in my imagination something out of an Evelyn Waugh novel, with the 'smart set' tootling down from London to enjoy grouse-shooting and a turn around its immaculately kept gardens. The house was requisitioned by the army during the Second World War, first by the Royal Marines, then the Canadian army before housing German Prisoners of War until 1947, and the McKay's ousted to their neighbouring farmhouse. The estate changed hands twice again immediately following the war years but after such a lengthy period of neglect the grounds and gardens were never restored to their former glory. By the time a group of enterprising, young North Londoners collectively purchased the property in 1975, the estate had declined to Grey Gardens-style proportions with the interior scuffed and scratched by the wheelchair-bound former owner and a pack of feral dogs. These seven families transformed the main house and outbuildings into separate living units while the forty-five acres of shared land accommodated workshops, a dairy, organic kitchen garden and (sometimes disastrous) experiments with every conceivable type of farmyard animal. Although somewhat modelled on and inspired by its hippy forbears, no political agenda was imposed on the community and it never aspired to be completely self-sufficient. Rather, it thrived on a shared moral sensibility to live more economically and to create a defensible environment in which to produce organic food and children.

As one of sixteen offspring growing up in the woods and fields of Thedden, there was a wealth of possibility for the childish imagination to run riot. I recall my heart racing every time I had to pass a coal shed situated down a dank, dark passage, for fear of catching sight of an abandoned tiger skin rug that was supposedly lurking in an alcove above it. I have no idea whether I actually saw the rug or even if it existed at all, but such was the power of suggestion that it is a myth that has seeped into the collective consciousness of the community. The estate held many relics of its past inhabitants, all possessing their own peculiar magic: an old and pungent smelling pigsty in the paddock that housed many a makeshift camp, a tombstone to a much-loved dog hidden in the woods, the rusted remains of a 1920s car at the bottom of a nearby overgrown quarry. Regular pilgrimages were made to each of these mementos from another era that had somehow slipped through the net. To young minds simply unable to comprehend their environment in any other incarnation they held a fascinating and enduring resonance. They were props for fantastical storytelling imbued with the tangible ghosts of their former owners.

During the late 1980s visits to the estate from the McKay's gamekeeper's son and a former German Prisoner of War provided live links back to the past. Minor yet fascinating details came to light, such as that books belonging to the British Museum had been stored in the squash court during the war. In 2007 Lyndall Phelps brought detailed inventories of specimens from the Natural History Museum which were stored in the house during the same period, along with the exact locations and manner in which they were kept. These included seventy eight boxes of mammal skins, from the crab eating fox to the raccoon dog, and The Ticehurst Collection of birds stored in tins, cabinets and chests.

Using an object or specific site as a launch pad, Lyndall Phelps' projects unfold through a meticulous and meandering process of research into the context surrounding them. The associations she weaves are highly subjective yet arrived at through a logical chain of connections opened up along the way. Phelps is often drawn to the obscure and overlooked, areas of science, horticulture or

handicraft that demand specialist knowledge and an obsessive eye. Merging myth and anecdote with historical and factual events, Phelps distils her invisible web of relationships into exquisitely refined objects, or archives of detailed information. These objects act as talisman; a contraction of time, space and history into a single tangible entity.

An intense level of personal investment lies at the root of each project, from the pilgrimage-like journeys she makes to gather information, to the often labour-intensive process of crafting her objects. Often working in multiple - demanding focused, repetitive actions - the accumulated volume of a work gives form to the painstaking hours invested. It also reveals an immersive, intensely personal dimension to Phelps's practice; a desire to connect with her subject through re-enactment.

Phelps own process in some way mirrors her interest in the human compulsion to 'collect, categorise and study nature'. Her most recent project, *Evacuate*, stems from research into the transferral of specimens from the insect, bird and mammal collections of London's Natural History Museum to country houses for safekeeping during the Second World War. Discovering that the owners of the houses regularly lived in and around the specimens, in kitchens, bedrooms and drawing rooms, Phelps set about reuniting the specimens with their temporary abodes. The list reads as a fascinatingly arbitrary yet highly specific inventory: assassin bugs and dragonflies at Wray Castle, Cumbria; roseate spoonbills and mounted house rats at Althorp Park, Northamptonshire; a tiger skin at Broughton Castle, Oxfordshire. After making photographic portraits of the specimens at the Museum, Phelps planted these images back in their respective domestic settings and re-photographed them. A further series of images shows the specimens in their current storage locations at the Museum, alongside photographs of the interiors of the country houses to which they were sent. These photographs operate as windows back in time, after-images revealing the latent memories of both the dead animals and the buildings to which they were sent, making manifest incongruous juxtapositions that would otherwise remain forgotten.

In keeping with Phelps' interest in sub plots and side narratives, *Evacuate* makes visible a little-known event in the Museum's history and a marginal consequence of the Second World War. The specimens, tagged like corpses and shored up in unlikely surroundings, become symbolic of an infinite network of relationships, while the documentation of the houses in their current usage, from school to retirement home, provides an interesting anthropological study into the changing function of the country home. Personal and social histories converge and are momentarily made human and graspable. Phelps compresses space and time, reanimating the past in the present to reveal a sequence of events that opens up further lines of enquiry. The inter-connectedness, and randomness, of everything in the world is simultaneously exposed. Yet, it is the deep level of personal engagement with the object that Phelps hopes to convey and extend to the viewer, to inspire an emotive connection and poetic reappraisal.

Lizzie Carey-Thomas, Curator, Contemporary British Art, Tate Britain