



View of “Cathy Wilkes,” 2018. Photo: Leif Anderson.

Cathy Wilkes

YALE UNION (YU)

How faint can a signal be and still transmit its meaning? At Yale Union, Glasgow-based artist Cathy Wilkes tested the limits of gallery-based communication with a small suite of unforthcoming images and objects that asked of their viewers fairly extreme levels of interpretive generosity. Those willing to invest in the artist’s elusive system of signification—more like an ambience of suggestion—were rewarded with a fine, almost transparent, sacramental vibration. For doubters, the experience was probably less.

Hung along the walls of YU’s hangar-like space, low to the floor, were six small images spaced widely enough to discourage the viewer from making any connections or performing cross-readings: a sun-brightened kitchen sink in grisaille, a color photo of a girl eating pizza, a drawing of a dog, a graphite drawing of some kind of grid, a white canvas with faint pink blush coming through, a brownish canvas composed of splotches and blobs. The pictures—each of which was unremarkable alone—seemed selected explicitly to frustrate easy reading, but they invited the judgment of arbitrariness as well.

Matching the low eye level of the images were four child-size mannequin-type figures also spaced liberally across the giant room. The most isolated of them resembled a chalk-white Sluggo—the boy from the comic strip *Nancy*, with his jug ears and skullcap—dressed in a simple purple robe, mounted on a bland, cotton-covered plinth. The figure gazed out across a thirty-yard chasm at two rectangular burlap pedestals with cruciform shapes made of tape and woven material affixed to their tops, each decorated with a single dried flower stem. Seen from afar, the low, rectangular shapes resembled single mattresses as designed by Donald Judd, or, more likely, stripped-down Minimalist coffins. Two more mannequins stood at the head of these apparent coffins. They resembled the Sluggo poppet in size, but were seemingly of a different creed, with long necks and bald heads and fingernail-shaped indentations for eyes. One wore an orange garment, the other a white garment with a fake flower and bib. A way off stood the fourth, final figure, with a brown wig and a brocade head covering, like a repurposed doily. This figure's face was of mottled *mâché*, with sad, collaged eyes, though none of the figures could be called remotely expressive.

Was the scene a funeral? Was the purple-robed Sluggo figure presiding? Were the other figures mourners? Family members? Fellow villagers? Had the figure off to the side been excommunicated for some reason? Was the spacing consequential in any way? The accompanying text made a point of not explaining anything, turning nondisclosure into virtue, but as the photons of significance feebly emanated, a viewer was forced to wonder: Death as an abstract concept? Death without a body? Grief without pain? Ceremony without doxology? The artist has deployed mannequin formations in the past to suggest cryptic domestic scenes, often to dour effect. Was there an evolving methodology here? An emotional point of view? Were these only gestures toward a later, more full-blown statement?

A few more objects led deeper or perhaps more widely into a discernible structure of feeling and thought. A pristine glass vitrine displaying an antique crystal decanter with a silver handle and mouth was mounted on a wall space well isolated from any other image in the room. So near to the funereal scene, the empty vessel flickered with liturgical associations, suggesting the transubstantiation of water into wine, but again the circuit was dampened. No water, no wine, just air, a Eucharist without mass.

Lastly, a few floor objects offered (potentially) more leading clues toward retrievable meaning: a book made of fabric scraps, opened to a spread embroidered with the word apples, and, perhaps most tellingly, a ceramic plate depicting a crucifixion scene—Jesus and the two thieves planted on Golgotha. Here, at last, a theme of transfiguration seemed to achieve a detectably Catholic inflection, albeit stripped of gaudy ornament and beamed through a secondhand object of camp. As in works by Robert Gober, with their surreal psycho-theology of ellipsis and disjunction, the detail maybe offered a glimpse at divine currents gushing beyond the viewer’s senses—touching the disparate, alienated elements of the show and lending them a shared atmosphere—or possibly a glimpse into nothing at all.

—Jon Raymond

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