



Becky Beasley: Spring Rain
Spike Island Bristol 26 January to 31 March
Review

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By Laura McLean Ferris

Over the past few years Becky Beasley's work has creaked open a little in the manner in which it addresses the viewer. Early sculptures and photographs were brooding, mute and darkly glowering, communicating their inability or refusal to speak. A screen from Herman Melville's 1853 novella *Bartleby the Scrivener* (he of the famous 'I would prefer not'), featured as a sculptural reference, as did Glenn Gould's piano, which the musician famously stopped playing in public.

These works, closely bound to a personally edited canon of (primarily male) writers and artists, often emphasised the incommensurable or unfathomable qualities of objects. A book might be aligned with a coffin because the size and scale of neither can really communicate the vastness of their impact.

Lately, however, Beasley has taken an interest in private passions, the way that lightness might leak in or out of a closed space, and the personal energies that might be diverted into cultivating or decorating. The artist took series of gleaming photographs of gems, glass and jewels, taken in architect Carlo Mollino's apartment, which he decorated secretly towards the end of his life. Eadward Muybridge's ambition to create a miniaturised landscape of the Great Lakes in the back garden of his Kingston home was realised by the artist in lino flooring.

'Spring Rain', Beasley's winter exhibition in the large bright space of Bristol's Spike Island, was positioned between states of interiority and openness. The exact area taken up by the interior of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donné*, 1946-66, the epitome of a space that is both secret and yet incommensurable in art-historical impact, was marked out in the exhibition in the first space in black lino in a colour described as 'wellness green': Stand on this space and stare straight ahead and you would see, not a hole in a brick wall and a naked, splay-legged woman lying in the grass before a waterfall, but a large gelatin silverprint of a tablecloth with a large hole right at the centre of it, *Would I had seen a white bear! (Northwest passag, AUX 1)*, 2013. The hole was apparently made by Beasley's mother so that the tablecloth could be used on a garden table which had a parasol at the centre. In turning this punctured fabric into a photograph, Beasley not only brings Roland Barthes's 'punctum' to the garden table (which the philosopher identified after seeing a photograph of his mother, one remembers) but also succeeds in recasting the protective actions of her mother, shielding the family from the sun, as a rather tender act of penetration. Another monochrome photograph, smaller in scale, depicting a hand holding a cucumber - *Cucumber Hand (1)*, 2013 - is positioned on the adjacent wall, creating a phallic gag in relation to the tablecloth but also rather straightforwardly conveying the pride felt in nurturing a growing vegetable.

Cucumbers proliferate throughout the exhibition, as do lighthearted gestures towards intercourse. A series of five handpainted silverprints of the vegetable, *Family Cucurbitaccae (I, II, III, IV, V)*, 2012, are

visible in the next room, each oddly curved and imperfect. Shot on a white background and positioned in various parts of the frame, they resemble swooping letters or pieces of genetic code. The exhibition's centrepiece is a motorised mobile, *Spring Rain (Family)*, 2013, from which hang on strings tiny brass casts of gherkins that the artist grew in her garden last summer. These appear to fall like knobbly, awkward little dancing raindrops, while surrounding these are photographs of pairs of 'male' and 'female' wooden blocks - one with a hole and one with a little phallic post - which are based on the spatial volume of Étant Donnée's split into two. They never connect in the images, either missing one another in angle, or hovering, as if tentatively, away from one another.

Beasley continues to speak through the works of others and to open up new elements of their work to viewers - it is one of the great pleasures that I take in her work and her close reading. Here she has included the works of two other artists: Charles Jones's photographs of vegetables famously which were found in a suitcase in a flea market, like strange silver jewels (a secret revealed), and several Richard Hamilton prints of interiors, which use multiple viewpoints or elements to depict motels and lobbies so that they appear to be falling open (like legs or waterfalls). Like Beasley, Hamilton opened up particular aspects in the work of an admired predecessor - Duchamp - with his care and attentiveness to the older artist's work, not to mention Hamilton's actual recreation in 1965-66 of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-23.

Bernard Malamud's short story *Spring Rain*, 1942, is a delicate, masculine narrative which, included as a handout, provides this exhibition's musical key - small moments of growing lightness. A man who has an inability to communicate, to say how he feels, is granted a glimpse of connection with another person while on a walk in the spring rain with his daughter's suitor. The emotional climax, beautifully underplayed, comes when he returns home alone and watches the rain continue to fall, like droplets of possibility washing and transforming his interior landscape. We understand the deep interior transformation taking place in the protagonist's soul when Malamud writes: 'The spring rain was falling everywhere.' In the final act of this exhibition, two tiny versions of Beasley's Duchampian wooden block couples, *Eclipse (I) (Peansoods No. 16 (2))*, 2013, spin slowly, squeakily on a small table like a melancholic music box, their connective peg and hole elements missing one another as they turn. Very occasionally, however, once in the spring rain, they manage to meet.

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