We Got Spirit: Literary Imagination in the Work of Christiane Blattmann

Without [the] attribution of a soul to the material world ... artefacts would just be objects and we wouldn’t even bother looking at them, as something that speaks, as art; or believe someone who claimed an artefact said something to them.¹

The connection between animism and art interpretation, so elegantly explained here by the critic Jan Verwoert, is something that often comes to mind when I think about the work of Christiane Blattmann. From early on in her practice, Blattmann has been interested in the ways in which objects have historically been imbued with meaning through tradition, mythology and ritual. Like Verwoert’s essay, her work can be seen to trace a line between the spiritual, cultural and religious practices of times past and the staging of contemporary art today. It’s an attitude that’s been informed, in part, by an eclectic mix of art historical reference points—including, but not limited to, Roman sarcophagi, Pompeian wall painting, and, most recently, medieval tapestries—as well as a number of idiosyncratic books, such as Gottfried Semper’s Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts, Or, Practical Aesthetics (1860 – 63) and Sir James George Frazer’s The Golden Bough: A Study In Magic And Religion (1890), which take an anthropological approach to their subject matter with a liberal sprinkling of literary embellishment.

For Un-Break My Walls, Blattmann chose three works of fiction—Monique Wittig’s Les Guérillères (1969), Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities (1972) and Aristophanes’ The Birds (414 BC)—as touchstones for the body of work she produced. Although they differ in style and genre, all three texts can be seen to offer (alternative) models of coexisting. Les Guérillères, for example, features an all-female community that live in harmony with the land, with the story’s conflict coming from the realization that this way of living was only made possible through a violent war between the genders. The Birds also revolves around a struggle for power—this time between birds, humans and Olympians. And Invisible

Cities, framed as a conversation between Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Khan, builds its narrative through a series of fantastical vignettes describing daily life in 55 fictitious cities.

When it comes to revealing the intentions and inspirations behind art works, how much is too much? It’s something that comes up when writing about any exhibition, but it’s especially difficult to answer when, as is the case here, an artist works both intellectually and intuitively—mixing research with an instinctual material–based studio practice. For her part, Blattmann has said that you don’t need to know anything about these sources to be able to “read” her work; instead she draws an analogy between Ikebana basket weaving, a technique used in a number of works in the exhibition, and the way that the information she collects is incorporated into her practice. “It gets tied in,” she says, “literally woven into a net that, in its entirety, shows another form, something else than the individual strands.” Furthermore, Blattmann sees her sculptures as “nourished by all those references, books and research, without being directly based on them.”

While this way of working is hardly unique to Blattmann’s practice, what is perhaps special is the belief that while these things might not be seen on the surface they could still be sensed, or perhaps more to the point, experienced. Similar to the way that Jan Verwoert asks us to consider how objects can be seen as having a “soul”, as an artist she is interested in the ways that sculptures can be “charged”. To return to Verwoert’s text, this charging can be seen as the point “when the work or thought comes to life because something in the work or thought happens that finds its rhythm in—and touches on—something other than itself.”

But although these three texts do not appear explicitly as motifs in the sculptures on display—there would be little enjoyment to be gained by holding them up against individual art works and trying to compare what is said against what you can see—they can nevertheless offer an expanded way of looking at the exhibition. Individually, they all hold interest for Blattmann: there’s the caustic humour of Birds, the vivid nature imagery of Les Guérillères and the skilful way architecture and urbanism are intertwined in Invisible Cities. But together they can be taken as examples of writers repurposing myths for their own ends: Aristophanes for satire, Wittig as a feminist rally to arms and Calvino to comment on the mechanics of fiction.

Myths are just one way that as a culture we have traditionally attempted to give meaning to the world around us; they tell stories that give weight to everyday occurrences, such as the flight of birds, for example, or the daily rising of the sun. Blattmann’s literary pursuits are a way of attempting to tap into that power, while still being aware of its artifice. If we can believe that stories can have a transformative power on our daily reality, so too can the staging of art objects—as long as we’re prepared to believe in them.

— Chloe Stead

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2 All quotes by the artist are taken from a number of email, Skype and phone conversations in March 2019.