

## Jane Boyer: Experience as Collage

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*An impersonal weathered surface is precious to us, a record of our past that cannot signal through a precise semaphore, a residue of the life from within that once informed secretly the stones of well-worn towns.*

*Adrian Stokes*<sup>1</sup>

Adrian Stokes, in his essay ‘Collages’, takes up the way the collage may comprise disparate elements of an urban environment that, in an earlier epoch, was experienced as a whole that integrated what was separate into the familiar and collective. In the constituents of the collage he sees still the possibility of a “stubborn unidealised affirmation” of the survival of ‘good objects’ – objects that are not completely overwhelmed by the degradation of that environment.<sup>2</sup> This could be understood also as a survival from trauma. Stokes is thinking primarily of the urban scene – of external reality. But in evoking the ‘secret’ of ‘the life from within’, he points also to the way in which a person’s internal environment, intruded upon by the vicissitudes (and traumas) of its psychic and corporeal history, might process event, thought, and feeling through the putting together of its fragmentary residue: the juxtaposing and overlapping of seemingly random objects and textures, the masking and reworking of prior constructions, that issue in images that communicate a mysterious but undeniably powerful insistence, seeming to unfold something that approximates to a narrative.

For Jane Boyer, in the ‘project space’ of this exhibition, that narrative is autobiographical; and although only a few of the pieces in it are technically collage, it is collage that is its presiding spirit. In the pieces corresponding very roughly to the “mosaic of paper scraps” by which Stokes describes collage, the open range of apparently chance heterogeneous images is apparent. But in those executed in mixed media reprography and other modes, a parallel range is at work: “the means of telling a story... translated into visual terms”<sup>3</sup> proceeds through repeated dismantling, altering, reinstatement and transformation of an original configuration. Through this giving up of the process to the order of chance that might supervene in digital manipulation, an image issues that reintegrates the original into a surface that, by its very small differentiations and repetitions, evokes a movement through time. So,

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Stokes, ‘Collages’, *Reflections on the Nude* (London 1967) p.29

<sup>2</sup> Op.cit. p.33

<sup>3</sup> Jane Boyer, *A project space called ‘I’* – premise statement

for example, in *Graphite*, the original image of a patch of wet asphalt with the sun shining on it is turned into symmetrical pattern. As Andrew Forge wrote of the work of Robert Rauschenberg's first two decades, "[he] has used chance not as a blind antidote to order but as a way of handling the streaming autobiographic current that is his subject matter... Whatever stratagem is used to court the unknown, there comes a point at which random material becomes polarised by the particular energy that is brought to bear on it".<sup>4</sup>

Jane Boyer's own openness to chance mirrors something of this intensity. As one moves from the open collage assemblages to, for example, the recurrent excavations and interrogations of the *Versions* sequence, one encounters something that seems simultaneously to be re-excavated and overdrawn, and at another level pared away: moving between past and present, trying to convey what is mute – perhaps unspeakable – at bedrock. One is increasingly aware of how different elements mirror, confront, meet, divide and reconfigure each other; of, above all, an energy of working and reworking that feels dialectical. Her 'curating' is in effect a rewriting and re-presentation, through the mechanism of art, not of a detailed narrative plot but of the characteristic motions, reversions, compulsions and desires of her particular experience.

What emerges is what Boyer has called a series of 'simulacra' – a construction in which a variety of elements combine to create a presence in which the potentially conflicting orders of difference and integration are held together in aesthetic form. They could be described – as indeed could the exhibition itself – as each creating an environment in which different takes on experience encounter, mirror, confront, supersede and incorporate each other. Boyer has been struck by the problem posed by Fredric Jameson in his work on Postmodernism – "the decision as to whether one faces a break or a continuity".<sup>5</sup> In the 'simulacrum' the problem is encountered as an aesthetic entity in which its emotional communication depends on the question being left open.

*Topographically Collage* might stand for one version of this construction. The image of the past is evoked by the sequence of overlapping images moving from left to right – with maps as an imaginary landscape that offers an abstract ground-plot of a narrative. That past is contained in the unfolding space, evoked by the detritus of the found, the accidental, the

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Forge, *Rauschenberg* (NY 1972) p.14

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham NC 1991) pp.xi-xii

random survival of others' outgoings, lives closed up in precipitates that adumbrate a version of the artist's own life – the map, the seduction, the interiors, women of an earlier generation, symmetries both fortuitous and intended of the anonymous landscape and the outlines of the one unequivocally benign female presence at the centre – issuing in the garden of a child's remembrance. The overlaid, the recovered and juxtaposed, suggest a continual return to the past in which mysterious presences – human or, in *Internationally Collage*, anonymous buildings – have both the insistence and the strangeness of images in one's memory, the familiar-unfamiliar furniture of one's dozing or waking consciousness. But also the *visual* textures express both the memory and the feeling, without requiring identification. Their status, and how they shape the present, remain enigmatic.

This sense of the known-unknown is taken up directly in *Fade*, where a 'deteriorating found photograph' presents a female presence over which line drawing seems to attempt restitution, but in which the presence of enigmatic forms from earlier paintings by Boyer (principally a form resembling an anatomical illustration of an eye at left, another round form, a mottled ground at right) seems to be in the process of appropriating the image to the artist's own world of preoccupation, her own repertoire of forms. Or is it this poignant half-absent presence, like a lost mother or an earlier version of herself, that appropriates in turn? One is reminded of Boyer's sense of "autobiographies as a patchwork of disparate, overlapping events stitched together to create an image of a life"<sup>6</sup>.

Both *On that day, two hairs fell from my head* and *Framed Debate* seem to corroborate that sense of the heterogeneous, the adventitious, though in semi-ironic mode. In the former, the postmarked stamps suggest the fixed time of memory, the postal communication that freezes or holds in stasis the two hairs as signs of astonishment, trauma, or mere event. A melancholy woman from a Seurat drawing on the upper stamp presides, turned away, not available. *Framed Debate* offers itself like a Joseph Cornell box: the reliquary of an event or a collection of objects that cannot be interpreted: the oil and acrylic breaking into each other as contrary elements, but also loosely strung together in juxtaposition by the banal hanging-cord of the frame. In both there are 'relics' that refer both to time and place and to the peculiarity of the art object, the Cornelian theatre of the banal – the everyday object given surreal presence, opaque, defeating speculation.

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Boyer, *A project space called 'I'* – premise statement

The implicitly narrative assemblage depends for its charge on the sense that it communicates of different layers of experience that have been expressed in different modes of expression, at different points of time, and now recurrently interrogated, stripped down, reconceived, overlaid. From this process a palimpsest emerges in which all these moments of being are simultaneously present in the simulacrum that represents and contains them. The *Versions* series brings this repeatedly before us. It begins from a framework constituted by earlier line-drawing that undergoes repeated alteration through the series; it seems to be at variance with the sense of physical after-impression of an unknown landscape – the scattered smudges from a different earlier work – that forms the ground. The enigmatic objects that were also present in *Fade*, and, in later *Versions*, looser and broader over-drawing (2 and 3), seem to create a kind of screen memory which undergoes continual redescription and revision. We are aware of varying attempts to give presence to some denser sense of experience that might bind fragments of different modes of expression together (4). The way the images were produced is characteristic of the way Jane Boyer's whole enterprise – the 'telling' of an 'I' – evolves into presence: a recurrent movement of attention/manipulation, in which a continual revisiting, excavating, receding, pulling back to the surface, of the base configurations, intimate a continual interleaving of past and present. The images that issue enact and contain these oscillations and imbrications, requiring from the spectator's attention a continual movement from an obscure inner landscape of suggestive forms to a surface in which those forms seem to be held by others less equivocal, connecting more robustly with a possible present.

These are complex experiences, binding many different sensations into one encounter. That they should be produced by digital reprography seems to dramatise the 'virtual' character of memory, the recovery of lost objects as a transformed presence, the shifting basis of the self. Boyer describes having excavated these layers "again and again", The 'versions' of a life are expressed through the layers of drawing, traces of earlier work, the changing status of discrete objects from the past, each leaving a trace that itself can endlessly be revisited: as though what underlies that process is a state of almost infinite longing.

It is not difficult to see behind this the impulse of collage – the 'secret' infusion of feeling in an environment of objects that are familiar and mysterious at once. The visual patina of the *Versions* series might remind one of the vestiges of wallpaper on a half-demolished house,

the remains of an environment once intimately familiar, now without witnesses. The objects, the traces, now body forth as potent but opaque presences – potent as objects in themselves, but the emotional histories of which they were a part masked and occluded.

In Boyer's own *Enigma Wallpaper*, an immersive environment is presented in which very small alterations performed by digital means transform the primary formal constituents into a less stable pattern than appears: the elements are disrupted by their own background and its repetition, creating an implicit dimension of time, in which each strip of marks requires a marginally different encounter, pressing on the spectator an experience more fluid and uncertain than might be expected. The question of 'break' or 'continuity' seems here particularly sharp – indeed the space this image takes up presents one virtually with an environment in which the contrast is directly present: what version of the self can be recognised in these repetitions and their complex visual interactions?

This sense of simultaneous familiarity and overlaying strangeness and disorientation is marked in *Poison Bottle*. It draws on a previous series by Boyer entitled *The I That I Tell*, and incorporates both the overdrawn text, and marks taken from a photograph of a stained wall in the Underground. The text is from Graham Greene's memoir *A Sort of Life*, and recalls a childhood memory of a garden; sitting in the structure of the text is an image of perfect flowers. The text – and hence the overall image – is defiled by stains that work through the imposition and occlusion of the text by the recension of the earlier art-work. The work here revisited enacts a process of recollection and revision that imposes on the text of the present an amorphous intervention – a homunculus? a penis? – that conflicts with the perfect object. Yet both persist, through and in the stained recovered text. So the image constitutes a simulacrum in which loss, decay, change, recuperation and survival coexist – an image of different layers of perception and feeling, each constituent of which stands discretely and cannot be bound in an overall coherence.

Jane Boyer has noted that "each retelling of a narrative involves a simulacrum of the self," asking whether that causes a change in the self.<sup>7</sup> I am reminded of an observation by Megan Luke, in an essay on Kurt Schwitters, that his sculptural objects "simultaneously court and deflect our impulse to seek recognition, which relies on the promise that identity is stable,

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication

that resemblance is possible, and that representations can be decoded”.<sup>8</sup> This evocation of Schwitters’s characteristic bringing together of the incompatible, his undermining of the assumed, implicitly suggests that with each simulacrum some new mutative internal accommodation to a conjunction that is both necessary and impossible is called for. In *Remember Me*, Boyer undersets the primary image with a pattern taken from a William Morris mother-of-pearl inlaid table-top – a solid but masked surface that intimates the power of culture, an ideal past. Over it and overwhelming it is a form drawn from another earlier work by Boyer that agglomerates ambiguous forms that cannot be decoded: the earlier form becomes an approximation, impossible to explicate. The obscurely febrile, mobile and densely packed entity suggests a brain configured in its folds. Yet against this opaque suggestion an apple, defined with the simplistic accuracy of a Victorian steel engraving, enclosed and insulated in its linear frame, casts a shadow. It suggests an unproblematic form of representation that abides by the laws of physics – but at a remove. So the two or more orders of representation must keep their uneasy equilibrium; and the self twists back on itself, recognising that it must adapt to a necessary given shot through with contradictions that cannot be resolved – an impossible task that must once again be undertaken.

Writing about Francis Bacon’s studio, Margarita Cappock observes that “through both wear and tear and deliberate manipulations by Bacon, a photograph, regardless of the status of its creator, gradually took on new aesthetic properties as its texture, format and surface changed”<sup>9</sup> For Jane Boyer, the sense of “new aesthetic properties” that issues from her dedicated and searching dismantling and manipulation of her own practice may translate into a different sighting of the self. *A project space called ‘I’* takes up her own history in painting and drawing that has issued from her intimate history – an experience both of trauma and disruption and of continuity and persistence; and from a determined search for recognition in herself. It has involved in part feeling the need to maintain a consistent ruthlessness towards her own earlier practice– dismantling, anatomising, redescribing – as the foundation of these emblems of reinstatement and transformation that now fill the gallery. What has issued is a range of work that can strongly engage us, and is often powerful and unsettling. She takes up the strangeness of daily experience in its random juxtapositions; she translates it through the simultaneous rendering strange of her own creations and recovering them. In doing so, she

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<sup>8</sup> Megan Luke, ‘Togetherness in Exile’, E. Chambers & K. Orchard (eds) *Schwitters in England* (London 2013) p.45

<sup>9</sup> Margarita Cappock, ‘Francis Bacon’s Studio’, A Geitner et al. (eds) *Francis Bacon and the Masters* (London 2015) pp. 149-50

creates images that are like nobody else's. They give back to herself and to us a sense of how the artist has turned the vicissitudes of an often dark experience into works in which both the residue of that darkness and an attendant lyricism coexist. And in doing so they remain open.