

Ursprung

Tess Walker Elliott's *Prelude* is a collection of images from a historic settler cottage. They depict the things - a bed, a dress, a cot, a cross - that populate this space. The rooms are dressed for one to engage with their history, but is this such an easy task? By focusing her attention between these walls, Elliott's interest is in the questions raised here around origin and descent; what she is creating is not an objective historical account but an 'effective' one. Descent is not a seamless continuity, and origin is not a solid object. It is, rather, as per Michel Foucault, "an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers[,] that threaten the fragile inheritor from within and from underneath".¹

Things come to stand in for a life, and for a history. Objects are never entirely untethered from the past. They are always haunted, a haunting defined by disappearance, by the impossibility of recollection. They are not conduits to an experience of the past 'as it was' but only 'as it is'. With their scratches, their stains, their worn down edges; they are the surface of the past and never the depths. We place these stubborn objects under the sign of history and ask them to speak, but in the end it is only through staging that they come to signify anything at all. The objects are composed in the museum in an attempt to define a continuum between these artifacts and the contemporary subject. This exhibition questions our capacity to meaningfully register this continuum; whether the concept of a historical lineage is not merely a post hoc construction, and whether we can really experience in our re-production of the past anything more than our contemporary assumptions projected backwards.

That we are 'experiencing' through two-dimensional images a representation of a space which is in itself representational - a simulated space which signifies a particular image of a national history - only further muddies these waters. There is a constant effect of diffusion, of distancing, enacted in the work: the gap between the past and its representation in history, the representation and the image, the image and the print, re-territorialised in the *staging* of an exhibition. The effect of all this layering mimics the operation of memory itself, which functions through the recollection of previous recollections, not - though it produces the illusion - through direct access to the moment itself.²

¹ Foucault, Michel. *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*. 'Language, Counter-Memory, Practice', 1977, 147.

² Sigmund Freud refers to the fact of memory construction in his essay 'Screen Memories' (1899) writing that, "it is perhaps altogether questionable whether we have any conscious memories *from* childhood: perhaps we have only memories *of* childhood. These show us the first years of our lives not as they were, but as they appeared to us at later periods, when the memories were aroused. [They] did not *emerge*, [...] but *were formed* [...]" (Freud 21) Freud, Sigmund. *Screen Memories*, 1899, 21.

National memory can be conceived similarly as a chain of representations, a kind of virtual palimpsest, wherein meaning is produced through the stacking of recollections. The operation of following this obscure line of descent takes place “on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and re-copied many times.”³ Obscured by these many layers is the moment of origin, the foundation of this entire operation. The question we should ask is whether such a moment ever existed, if instead what is to be found in its place is the “secret [that its essence] was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms”⁴ that “[w]hat is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; [but] the dissension of other things.”⁵

Elliott’s work questions one aspect of, or iteration in, the chain of representations: the space of the colonial settler museum. More specifically, the subject is an Auckland (as opposed to a rural or regional) settler museum, which takes the form of a simulated domestic space. Set in a real historical home - representing the life of an actual settler family, as opposed to an imaginary archetypal one - the spaces emphasise the activities of the maternal, home-making, late 19th-century Pākeha women. It takes as its material the setting and archive of an actual family history, and explodes it into a universal representation of the ideal (upper-class, landed, metropolitan) settler, witnessed through the gaze of the historical settler women. Elliott’s images don’t actively dispute this narrative - in fact they seem partially to identify with it; there is definite affection here for the beauty of these artifacts and spaces - but, by re-presenting these objects through the distancing apparatus of photography, within the ritualised encounter of the exhibition, they replicate the way we receive our image of the past.

The images in *Prelude* remind us that history is not uncovered, preserved, or restored. History is never accessed in its original truth. History is made.

Exhibition response by Liam Philip

³ Michel. Nietzsche, *Genealogy, History*, 142.

⁴ Ibid. 139.

⁵ Ibid.