



Clean & Clear

Nina Canell, *Tendrils*

The Douglas Hyde Gallery Dublin, 29 September - 14 November 2012

‘Clean & Clear’ sounds like a dishwasher detergent. I can imagine the T.V. advertisement for such a product, in which eye-clean crystals twinkle in a tumble of water: All dirt, grime, fingerprints – the dirty atoms that compose blemished human biology – sterilised to an inch of their life. KILLS GERMS DEAD!

Why is it that such sterilised visuals come to mind when reflecting on Nina Canell’s solo show entitled *Tendrils* at the Douglas Hyde Gallery Dublin. Perhaps it is the streak-free apparatus that contain an array of obfuscated ephemera, as if a tide of *Domestos* stormed the gallery in one great flush, and what we are left with are fractions of life. A quart. A slice. A seed.

For instance, within a perfect perspex box a crystal clear jar supposedly quarantines the air from one Dmitri Mendeleev’s St. Petersburg study – a Russian scientist who created the first version of the Periodic Table. A lesser known fact about Mendeleev is the story of his mother starting up a glass factory to support her family after her husband’s death. This ‘glass’ backstory helps to extract a playful narrative from Canell’s use of a glass jar to house the very air of the scientist’s study.

Furthermore, Canell’s glass jar signifies the harsh realities of life on one hand – a lone parent’s responsibility to fend for her children in the midst of tragedy – and on the other less calloused hand, the impossible fantasies that a parent has for her offspring. Hardship invariably begets fantasy.

Two tubes of Canell’s trademark blue neon also suggest fantasy as they saddle stone blocks on the gallery floor. They remind one of a blacksmith’s glimmering iron ore and anvils hugged by beaten metal: the heat manipulated copper tubes that stand alongside compound the alchemical vision.

The question ‘Why so many of one thing?’ is posited when confronted with the multitude backless picture frames that span two significant lengths of wall in the gallery. Up close, the frames themselves are dotted with water melon seeds in a grid-pattern – spat out by the artist as part of the creative output. This is a welcome taste of dirty realism (spitting is not lady-like), but what comes to the fore is the problem of how to display such a visceral act as artwork. I am caught between being critical of reducing such subjectivity to a dried and dead seed – ‘LIVE’ salvia can only be imagined



through the panes of invisible glass on which the seeds are attached. However, the work gradually resolves itself as the strict uniformity of the display of seeds becomes unkempt when you find that each seed has its own individuality, and that one seed is missing from one of the framed sets.

My favourite element in the gallery is the handmade twig of composite wires that awkwardly hangs from the electrical conduits high up in the gallery. A 'sample' extract can be found on the gallery wall. An entangled thing of DIY beauty it suggests homespun metal biology, and activates the gallery space like Duchamp's *Mile of String* (1942). The activation of the space is not physically experiential, but jolts the imagination like the residual image of crackling lighting overhead.

At the time of viewing Canell's work in the gallery, I felt that all humanity had been washed clean from the trinkets that were beached on gallery floor, and what biological elements that were supposedly percolating in the artist's objects were imagined. Perhaps the fantasy of the saliva that coats Canell's water melon seeds and the jar-contained dust mites from Dmitri Mendeleev's studio are best left to the imagination than the dirty reality.

Ten years have passed since I first saw the origins of Nina Canell's enigmatic use of material when she was a student at Dun Laoghaire institute of Art and Design. Although I vaguely remember her installation of stacked cardboard boxes and the audio of a bird tweeting, that memory has been retained while the other 23hrs 55mins of that same day have been lost. Canell's brand of airy ephemera may have a more pristine edge to it today, but her work still succeeds in making what are fleeting moments, permanent. JAMES MERRIGAN

IMAGE 1: Nina Canell – *Tendrils*
Installation photograph
douglasshydegallery.com

IMAGE 2: Nina Canell – *On Thirst (Bells)*, 2010
Bells, wood, wire, copper, nails, cable
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of private collection, Essen
douglasshydegallery.com