

FERGUS FEEHILY
DISAPPEARANCE

JUNE – JULY



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There is something utterly fascinating about an artist remaking his own work. Not a performance artist – as has been witnessed so often of late – remaking his or her own work or restaging the works of others, but simply the peculiar act of remaking or modifying what has been made in the past, by his own hands. If we conceive of contemporary restaging – the appropriative gesture *par excellence* – as the attempt to recontextualise an artwork of established renown, perhaps modernising or even problematising its message, then how do we conceive of restaging or reworking from within a single authorial circuit? Remaking with a view to improvement might indeed be fathomable, but what about when this is not the strategy at all: how do I interpret the self-appropriative gesture that aims not at betterment, but only estrangement? Hewn by the same hands, and by the employment of the self-same materials, the remade work cannot but transmit the impossibility of self-identity with its precedent: those hands are changed now, and the mind that governs them, too. Fergus Feehily's *Cloud (reprise)* (2013) is just that; a reprise of *Cloud* (1997), sharing a sensibility, but diverging irrevocably in form. By this thought, the latter does not cease in its initial manifestation, but rather finds new, often wildly deviating forms, in its future.

The End Again (2013) is a further articulation of this specific awareness. In this piece, the artist creates a further variant of an earlier work, which was neither named nor shown, and subsequently lost. In an attempt to elucidate its specificity more precisely, he reimagines this work, leading to another, formally divergent and yet seeking the same end: though what 'end' is being restaged here, 'again'? In recent years, Feehily's work has taken a decidedly non-figurative direction: MDF constructions, cloth and found images populate his work with considerable ubiquity. Perhaps it is this 'end', the painterly decision to renege on painting, to move away from its conventions, that is being redrawn and replotted: an air of nostalgia permeates this at once strange and touching act. Arguably now, as a more established artist, older and perhaps wiser, the youthful impulse *to stop, to give up*, is no longer an option; no longer as clear-cut, either. The decision to stop painting is dependent not on the abdication of paint or canvas, but rather on the repudiation of the painterly method. By recasting the earlier work as *The End Again*, Feehily flattens the one into the other, and yet – literally and metaphorically – they do not fit: their disharmony reveals nostalgia for the thought that there might, in fact, be an end. The work is not an end in itself, but merely the starting point for something else.

Suggestions of nostalgia can be witnessed throughout *disappearance*. One of the central pieces in the show, *Lament* (2013), perfectly captures this stance, which is neither sentimental nor indulgent: rather, Feehily uses material – the glittery paper, colours of childhood and a kind of specific attention to chance objects – to create a sense of nostalgia, undifferentiated and all the more effective for it. The work comprises a plywood board that rests at a diagonal between the wall and a possibly empty cardboard box, on which it sits. The board's surface is a panel of dense silver glitter, the kind that continuously moults, until you find specks of it on your face, still, three weeks later. At the underside of this gleaming board is attached another thin stretch of plywood, and from this hang varying lengths of fabric in a candid surfeit of colour.

Talking with the artist, I told him that, for me, *Lament* perfectly captured this mood of considered



nostalgia. The cardboard box, atop of which a glitzy surface lay at a diagonal to the wall, was not just any kind of box: it was a *Switzer's* box. I still have memories of my female relatives off on a trip to *Switzer's* for the day, in particular to do the Christmas shopping. The Christmas display, at least to my rural child self, was wondrous: now, the Dublin department store *Brown Thomas* occupies the space where it once was, though its sign still rests on one of its facades. This empty *Switzer's* box contains a lot of memories, perhaps more than any other. Indeed, the choice to include this specific cardboard box, and no other, is a deliberate one: who, after all, even has one anymore?

This air of nostalgia, a certain willingness to let objects speak for themselves and to breathe a life into them perhaps more emotive than before, also pertains to the titles of the works themselves: *Lament*, *Stars (good night)*, *Couple* etc. The poetic license granted by these titles opens up a space for projection, not necessarily easily given by the form of the works individually. Other places, other times, come to seep into the frame. *Feehily's* continued use of found objects, too, seems to work in parallel with this strategy: what are they if not catalysts for this thought or that, a newfound affinity with the object over and above formal, aesthetic qualities? Titles, chosen well, can create objects more palpable to the viewer, more disposed to divulge. Less reticent than previous work by *Feehily*, the works included in *disappearance* seem to invite the viewer in: imbued with a softness and warmth, they create webs of association in which the viewer can easily partake.

The works stop short at figuration, however. Although some glimpses might be hinted at – the work *Pillow* (2013), for example – the work still holds its cards tantalisingly close. Though I might perceive in its sketch-like brush marks the form of an actual pillow, this may or not be the case. The title effects to create the sense of a pillow, its softness and warmth, irrespective of whether or not that is in fact what is being represented. *Feehily's* titles, more often than not, pull in different directions to what is actually there, formally: splitting from it, they create a space for meaning. *Meadow Table (other places)* (2013), perfectly encapsulates this process. Though the work is explicitly figurative in one sense – the table was indeed found in a meadow – the table has been moved and supplanted by other, more incongruous objects. Here in the gallery, the meadow becomes an *other place*: the table holds its memory of it, a memory that splits from its current setting. Resting on top of this table are: two books, the first on Persian rugs, the second, a study of moth genera; an empty toilet roll with black crushed paper pushed down into it; a lone beercap. To trace a unity of objects, a correspondence even, is difficult, if not impossible. Likewise, to see them, and the table itself, as within a system of equivalence – a coherent *mise en scène* – is just as arduous. Perceived together, the work's figurative sympathy towards that by which it is named, is muddled and compromised: it resists the easy approach of figuration to which its title attests.

Having written on *Feehily's* work before some years back, I have tried to resist the temptation to simply describe the changes apparent in his practice between then and now: some elements, after all, do not change: they are hard-won and fundamental to the practice. These are those traits that make his work almost instantly recognisable: small scale; low-fi, often found materials; layering and covering of materials, and so forth: his language, if you will. And yet, though the language has changed little, continuing along in much the same way, variations of tone have crept in: changes in intonation and emphasis. This is how I view his current use of colour. Its lack was



Fergus Feehily *Lament* Glitter and cloth on plywood and found cardboard box
Panel: 25 x 20 x 1.6 cm Box: 27 x 28 x 30 cm 2013

never striking in previous works, but here, in *disappearance*, its omnipresence, its sheer embrace, is indeed conspicuous. Pink, lime green, mauve and maroon, the works depart from their (seemingly) straightforward forms, and offer a new means of thinking about these objects; one predicated not on the act of layering or hiding, but rather one of candour. The colours used, in much the same way as the titles, shade and imbue the works with an impression of palpability, a certain sensuousness or mood.

Take, for example, the piece *Couple* (2013). A minuscule work, certainly one of the smallest here, it has a lightness of touch and delicacy befitting its meticulous construction. An irregular octagonal shape, reminding me of the work of Richard Tuttle, it consists of the delicate negotiation of two materials: firstly, an image, cut into the aforementioned shape, on which something is printed. We are not privy to the entire image as a thin sheath of wan pink is overlaid over its central ground, extending out at a diagonal past the cardboard underlayer. This extension, almost transparent, is then pinned directly to the gallery wall. Machine-sewn onto the surface of pink cloth are two other layers, held only at the top so as to allow them to diverge slightly from the works' surface. The impression of the piece is one of withholding, but perhaps of a more intimate kind: diffident almost, Feehily makes a concession to the viewer by these outer panels, perhaps too late, and allows her the possibility to see *under*: here, not everything is closed off. This is further reciprocated by the dual action of title and hue: a decidedly charged word – 'couple' – paired with pink, and certainly mawkishness might be sensed. What couple, though? Speculatively, this is what is hidden from us: the sepia outline of an image can be glimpsed at the bottom centre of the work, so perhaps therein lies their representation. The couple, also, might simply refer to the pair of pink cloth forms that sit to the fore of the work, inserting themselves more closely to us. I might sense it to be the first option, and yet I can never be certain. The hue, paired with its title, attract me to an emotion that lacks a fixed centre: no figurative echo is divulged, no representation that might usher in certainty, and yet its sensibility, its warmth, opens towards me. The empty centre is not barren, but rich.

That empty centre, like Feehily's slender layer of colour, invisible from the front, is the space of an infinite set of possibilities. What I find most rewarding about his work is that it is never fully resolved for me; each time I revisit, I rethink and reevaluate, allowing associations to enter into its specific sense of meaning. Feehily, too, appears to accede to this logic; for me, *The End Again* is its most compelling articulation. For him, though the work might be complete, and finalised, it never stops to matter: it is an empty centre that at any stage might tug everything back towards it once again.

I am reading a beautiful novel at the minute, *The Infatuations* by the Spanish author Javier Marías. It deals, quite simply, with loss. In the book, the narrator recounts a shared bond – never articulated – between her and a couple she observes every morning in her local café, Miguel and Luisa. To her, they are "the perfect couple", their happiness making her at ease by the mere act of simply sharing their space. They never exchange words, only the occasional nod of recognition, and yet with Miguel's sudden and senseless death, she, like Luisa, is set into a state of shock. Miguel has become an emptiness where there was once a living, vibrant person. All that is left is what he has become, an empty centre, around which everything revolves. No matter how much Luisa tries



Fergus Feehily *Cloud (reprise)* Found wood, found frame, glass 38 x 30 x 1.5 cm 2013

to locate a point towards which she can anchor her memories of him, she finds only muteness. Strangely, I often think of artworks in this way: I try to locate a point wherein I can anchor my experience, often intense, and cannot reconcile it, cannot equate it with the formal properties of what is, after all, simply another thing. And yet there is a richness that cannot be flattened to its formal qualities. Feehily's work relates for me the crux of this situation, at once a challenge and a possibility. The works contained in *disappearance*, slight in scale and modest in nature, supersede their formal qualities, and grant a poetry all too infrequent. The task when writing about it is never to forget this coup or take it for granted: like Feehily, one must remain alert to this central lack, never dispirited, always chasing it as it disappears.

Rebecca O'Dwyer



Fergus Feehily *Pillow* Oil and acrylic on panel and wood, 25 x 20 x 0.9 cm 2013