

mother's annual 2015

Sam Anderson *Talley's Folly*

April - May

A Fierce and Ordinary Reality

A woman sits side-saddle on a donkey. Looking disgruntled, she turns to face us. She dismisses our stares but also appears somewhat resigned to them: the donkey is going nowhere fast. Made of clay, together the pair of them is no more than twelve inches high. A theatrical spotlight falls on the duo where we meet them first in mother's tankstation's gallery one. The focused light is cast from a ceiling-mounted projector and moves slowly around, illuminating the woman briefly before it dips and falls onto the floor, its colour changing from red to orange to white, like a temper that repeatedly flairs and then temporarily abates. In *To the Omega* (2015), the woman, shrouded in emptiness save for the directional light, seems to be riding slowly into the night or, as the title suggests, to the Omega, the Greek alphabet's concluding letter, eschatology's symbolic end of everything, an unclear destination, this sulky woman's final curtain.

Sam Anderson's clay protagonists appear three times in *Talley's Folly*, an exhibition that is made up of sculptural components configured in dramatic tableaux. There are fixed spatial coordinates around which we physically circulate and speculate as to Anderson's suggestive narrative. The title, *Talley's Folly*, refers to a Pulitzer prize-winning play by American playwright Lanford Wilson, an off-Broadway production familiar to Anderson through the professional acting career of her mother.ⁱ Wilson's 'Talley's Folly' is a one-act piece in which the protagonist Matt returns to visit Sally a year after their first meeting. The narrative is articulated from Matt's perspective; who has written Sally a love letter every day since, and to which she has replied only once, spurning his affections. Sally eventually relents and under a specific set of conditions, agrees to marry Matt. The writing of Sally's character shows an aversion to the convention of family units atypical of a female dramatic lead in theatre or film - then, as now. The exhibition is perhaps Anderson's reimagining of the original play's denouement from Sally's perspective, but without Matt. It seems contented in its singularity, underscored by the three appearances of the *solitary* mule-mounted figure. It is in essence, Anderson expresses, an exhibition about "unwanted Valentine cards"; about the awkwardness at their arrival, the discomfort of imagining the intentions of their sender and "a certain buffoonery that motivates their consignment".ⁱⁱ

In the main gallery space, the body of the exhibition hosts six scenes. Five platforms have been fabricated at two distinct heights, supporting white wooden tables of no greater width and breadth than a tea tray or a small games table. The perimeters are slightly raised to enclose diminutive scenarios, each one furnished with a mixture of found and repurposed objects. Together they create whole landscapes or environments evocative of different scenes, or domains referenced within the play, ranging from the domestic to the celestial. In *Liz*, two snooker cues have been snapped and tape-joined in the centre and suggest the flirtatious posture of a brazen *femme fatale* perched on the side of a snooker table, legs crossed and toes pointed. On each of the table's four corners, cockroaches have been fashioned from biscuit joints on small wooden rounds, positioned heads up and wings flexed, so that we can almost hear the clicking sound of their bodies in motion. It appears as if we've stumbled upon a seduction scene in the dark and clammy interior of a late-night dive bar.

In the nearby *Boats* (2015), the scale is smaller - or, as if seen from a more distant viewing point. Also elevated on a table, its surface is covered with a layer of flour and two wooden pieces shaped into ships' hulls point in opposite directions, as if night-passing one another at sea. The boathouse from Wilson's original narrative is loosely referenced here, the sense of which is also reflected in the architecture of the gallery, an old, industrially clad building with its ceiling steels exposed beneath a pitched roof. Scale down again, and adjacent to this piece another table constitutes *Rows* (2015), at the centre of which sixteen holes have been drilled. Evenly spaced and some centimetres apart, they have been 'planted' with upright strands of hay, giving the appearance of a meticulously constructed field. It is another fleeting reference to the agricultural setting of Wilson's 'Talley's Folly', in the rural outskirts of Lebanon, Missouri, but it's somewhat de-naturalised by the exact measurements of its grid. In the outer four corners of the work sit four wooden spheres, left unpainted except one, which is covered in patches of reds and blues. With the mottled finish of a distant planet perceived from space, it's framed with fine, straight lengths of acrylic: scaffolding that might hold this tiny globe in orbit.

We navigate between these tabletop scenes, scaling up and scaling down as we observe each highly orchestrated satellite view of mini-universes. As viewers negotiating these shifts in perspective, we might associate ourselves with camera operators working within a film studio complex. Fittingly, the configuration of tables runs like a careful arrangement of stages, in the manner a centralised Hollywood film studio might house several sets simultaneously during production. The clear delineations of space through the grid of tables allows for concentrated areas of activity, and the repeated appearances of various characters or elements, creating a continuity from tableaux to tableaux, that is, if not linear, then certainly loosely sequential. This mapping of works provides Anderson's objects with a particular kind of agency, retrieved and repurposed at different points and opened up to a variety of readings.

Grids are in fact a common device in her work at large. Anderson repeatedly uses them to establish an open, suggested form of narrative progression for her immobile sculptural protagonists within a fixed exhibition space. In a 2013 exhibition *Shuffle Puck Café* at Bed-Stuy Love Affair, New York, evenly spaced lumps of coal were placed directly on the gallery floor, providing a curiously evocative fencing for a variety of scenes. The protagonist in this exhibition was the toad skeleton, which reappeared in several instances as if running a gauntlet of challenges (one of which was set in an old-style saloon bar, conveyed through a tiny free-standing model of the saloon's quintessential swinging doors). This particular grid added a durational aspect to the appearances made by this sculptural character, as the exhibition visitor traversed the various scenes along the toad's journey. In *Talley's Folly*, the woman sitting on the mule replaces the 'traveling toad'. In another of her appearances in this exhibition, 'Talley' and the donkey now appear theatrically posed on one of the tables. A dusting of black pepper extends from the donkey's hooves, as if he's making tracks through the earth. This subtle detail transforms the white painted wooden surface into a dirt track or dusty pathway: the duo's journey, it implies, is long and unrelenting.

Talley's Folly is tellingly the first time Anderson has chosen an overtly female protagonist to 'star' in one of her shows. Not only is this a statement, but this particular female protagonist displays the kind of emotional ambivalence a woman might easily feel towards unwelcome romantic attentions - a habitual experience that is rarely represented in the female leads of 'romantic' narrative arcs of mainstream literature, television or film. Might this woman, with her cartoonish facial features and her slow, donkey-bound mobility, be read as the artist's self-abased alter ego, delivering a nuanced and exaggerated version of Anderson's own experiences? Perhaps disregarding unwanted attentions, or abstaining from an occasionally presented, charmless 'romance', desiring to leave them far behind? As such, the exhibition reads interestingly as a sculptural rendering of a 'road movie', beginning at the point that Sally leaves the small town where she's from and the fate of a lifetime with Matt. The road movie is a film genre that evolves from numerous historical examples in literature and mythology: American scholar and mythographer Joseph Campbell coined the term the 'monomyth', or the 'Hero's Journey', as a literary template in which the hero goes on an adventure and then, after succeeding against a number of challenges, returns home transformed.ⁱⁱⁱ This genre once again traditionally privileges the male as the protagonist, with few female exceptions. Anderson pushes beyond the limits of Wilson's narrative by the creation of a journey for an edited version of Sally, setting her upon such a lone adventure, with only the lowly mule for company.

Tonally, the work brings to mind the kind of abject performances of a previous generation of American artists, Michael Smith or Mike Kelley perhaps, who responded to the competitive rhetoric of machismo within mainstream film by creating their own alternative, often 'pathetic' personas. Ralph Rugoff wrote of Kelley, that he "registered the devastating effects, the shame and degradation, wreaked on the image and object consumer...."^{iv} Rugoff proposed that Kelley's sculpture and performances, "dismantled the conventional image of the masculine self, replacing its domination act and sublime theatrics with a playhouse of ineptitude and polymorphous slapstick."^v The calamitous altar egos created by Kelley and Smith spectacularly failed to live up to the heroised stereotypes of the American male as depicted in mainstream media. Similarly, some thirty years later, Anderson's woman-on-mule seems to reject the kind of competitive female protagonists portrayed in the mainstream 'romantic comedy' trope. Her proffered alternative - although certainly not inept or slapstick - is considerably less sprightly than the conventional industry norm. In contrast, Anderson's mildly dismissive looking clay woman is a refreshing alternative to the courteous, well-tended, submissive women we are *still* so often sold as an exemplar. Neither is Sally chaperoned or complimented by a male lead, unless of course, we consider the donkey as cast in this role? Anderson has said of these animals, "I like donkeys because they are most always perceived as docile, lesser horses. Broken in, tired, sleepy, maybe drunk, weighed down, sturdy but also fragile."^{vi} This animal is the droll accompaniment to Anderson's woman,

silent and unglamorous. Citing Donna Haraway's 'When Species Meet' as an influential text, Anderson ponders the philosopher's observation that, "these figures [cyborgs, monkeys, apes and dogs] are at the same time creatures of imagined possibility and creatures of fierce and ordinary reality".^{vii} That strange paradox is shared by Anderson's woman-on-mule, a story rarely told of a lone woman on her way to some unknown destination for which romantic pairing is neither the aim or reward.

Anderson's found-object tableaux evoke fable-like narratives in which curious protagonists run a gauntlet of adversities; landscapes, encounters and challenges, of which the outcomes remain mysteriously unresolved. In *Talley's Folly*, the monomyth's protagonist is unusually, and significantly, female but her humble clay pairings and scaled down installations are presented entirely without cynicism or irony. Anderson concludes, "I like using *Talley's Folly* as the title of this body of work, I like the idea of something that is built with your hands as a labor of love and how it too can become a *folly* - I like the double meaning of the word."^{viii} Beyond the double meanings of Anderson's intent, she treads a fine line between pathos and bathos, with characterisations that achieve an equilibrium between disgruntlement and purpose. Discretely personal and universally meaningful narratives also fall perfectly between tragedy and comedy. It's unusual and captivating this careful folly, an exquisite sculptural drama that is both fierce and ordinary.

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ⁱ Anderson in conversation with the artist Uri Aran, says, "my mother is a character actor... most of her friends are character actors too. I grew up around them and attended many plays and acting classes. In the beginning, I was too young to understand the subjects they performed, but what I remembered were the tones, rhythms, and bits of dialogue that I thought were great but too embarrassing to tolerate outside the theater." *Equal Equal*, issue 2, <http://www.equalequal.info/issue-2/sam-anderson-uri-aran/>, [last sourced May 2015]

ⁱⁱ The artist in conversation with the author, April 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Campbell, 'Hero with a Thousand Faces' (1949), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968.

^{iv} Ralph Rugoff, 'Mike Kelley and the Power of the Pathetic', Mike Kelley, Catholic Tastes, New York, Whitney Museum of Art, p.162.

^v Rugoff, p.161.

^{vi} The artist in conversation with the author, May 2015.

^{vii} Donna Haraway, 'When Species Meet', Minneapolis, London, Minneapolis University Press, 2008.

^{viii} Artist's notes, written prior to the exhibition, sent to the author May 2015.