

somewhere in the middle

Sara Baume

Picture everything you've ever carried in a plastic bag. Ten thousand frozen peas, one hundred apples, fifty bars of soap – likely. Two dozen souvenir fridge magnets – possibly. One tiny goldfish swimming awkwardly in a pint of cloudy water – certainly.

Now try to picture every plastic bag. Clear, opaque, black, striped, azure – probably.

I can conjure up the taste of the most recent apple, the smell of the current bar of soap; recall the name of the tiny goldfish and how long she survived.

But it's practically impossible to remember any bag in particular.

They were so nondescript, so transient; existing only to contain and convey other objects, to facilitate other tastes and smells and recollections. They only delivered – and then, almost immediately – were disburdened, discarded.

Vessels emptied, skins shed.

Plastic bags (without a burden), phone wires (without a voice), timber frames (without a picture), insulation board (without a wall), willow rods (without a tree) – the matter of Maggie Madden's practice is drawn from the no-man's land between function and waste.

On a bus journey in the direction of home, staring into the gallery of my smartphone, studying the photographs I took on a visit to the artist's studio. Squinting to distinguish between artworks and the surfaces to which they are secured. The finest pieces have become livid – only their fixtures and shadows remain visible.

Above the bus roof, the slow-swaying phone lines; beneath the bus wheels, subterranean cables. Wires inside wire – strands of silica glass inside the wires inside the wire and inside the glass; voices spoken, letters typed. A system of communication as abstruse as the shadows in my photographs.

In the studio, there was a Tupperware lunchbox filled with fluff, collected from the artist's jumpers and the jumpers of her loved ones. Madden frowned when I mentioned it, explained that this was only the failed fluff – a batch of bobbled fibres lacking the correct consistency and buoyancy to be serviceable as art.

There are rules only she understands. Where and how to cut, join, place. Reasons only she can determine. Just look, look closer, look again.

Switching from bus to van for the last leg. Home to a landscape not unlike the one Madden was raised in, the one which ghosted contours onto her preconscious. A shroud of diaphanous mist. Fields fenced by wiggly stone. Branches and foliage – jittering, rustling. A slick of freshly laid tar, a powdering of cow-nuts – spilled, smashed, smoothed. A stash of bright shells in a pocket in the sand.

Vessels, skins.

And back again in the kitchen, a drawer glutted with used bags. Crumpled into submission – wrinkled, aged. Handles overstretched, bellies slit by cardboard corners, linings slicked by condensation, the soured yoghurt of a carton which popped, the disseminated poppy seeds of a long-eaten loaf. Here are the things you have carried and expect to.

The slow fill.

The artist sits in the studio amongst her materials. Still, silent. Until they start to speak – a pilgrim watching for a statue to move. Only she can hear their speech – in the same way that nobody but the addressee receives the communicate of the addresser in a strand of silica glass. Only the artist can accurately classify fluff.

The shades of heather and ocean, the small houses on tall sticks of a “floating village” in the Mekong basin, the ware stored inside her father’s shed and the marks he makes while unaware that he is mark-making all together protracting the contours of consciousness. Look closely enough, look again, and every intercession – however incidental or slight – has been considered, and every consideration has left its ghost.

An exacting palette of matter and means, elastically employed.
A process of arbitration.

Madden’s pilgrimage always leads her here – to the no-man’s land between forms.

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