

Humility and Transcendence in James David William Clarke's *Get Down / Be Low*

James David William Clarke's *Get Down / Be Low* is a series of two installations. The first, *Get Down*, was part of a three-person collaboration called *Humble to the Ground* which participated in *Deptford X* in September this year. The second, *Be Low*, was part of another three-person exhibition, opening a month later, called *Material Transcendence*, at Worlds End Studios in Chelsea. The installations reflected on humility and transcendence in the relationships between the spiritual and physical, art and craft, and idea and material.

Clarke's installation *Get Down* in *Humble to the Ground*, involved a shelter formed by two triangular frames stretched with debris netting leaning against each other on a bank in the grounds of the Laban Dance Faculty building. Visitors were invited to sit in the grass under the structure, drink a cup of nettle tea and read a signed, limited-edition pamphlet by the artist. On this pamphlet, a triangular William Morris-esque nettle wallpaper design is repeated on one side and on the other is printed a handwritten stream of consciousness around an image of the original triangular canvases painted with the nettle design and constructed into a structure like that of the shelter.

In the diary-like text Clarke articulates his visitors' unmediated encounter with nature. He writes 'I can't create a painting better than the experience of being in nature.' Sure enough, as I sat with the artist, reading his text on the cold, damp, purple grass beneath the empty, translucent canvases, the sky exploded into iridescent blues and pinks, turning to a rich bright orange towards the horizon where the sun burst through inky patches of clouds. This humble acknowledgement of defeat resonates with a movement in the mid-Nineteenth Century, headed by Henry Cole, the founder of the Museum of Ornamental Art, now the Victoria and Albert Museum, to educate the nation regarding the morality of good and bad taste. While this now and then was taken as outrageously judgemental, it was based on a philosophy of design that elevated humility, appropriateness and truth. Imitation of nature was ill-favoured and considered proud or 'false'. A gallery at the Museum of Ornamental Art entitled 'Examples of False Principles in the Decoration', which came to be known as the 'Chamber of Horrors', gave examples and explanations of each. One jug (catalogue no. 76) was described as a 'rude imitation, in blue earthenware, of the trunk of a tree, on which are applied figures, vine leaves and grapes'. A carpet (catalogue no. 1) was criticised for its 'Direct imitation of nature'.¹ The catalogue for the exhibition read:

There has arisen a new species of ornament of the most objectionable kind, which it is desirable at once to deprecate on account of its complete departure from just taste and true principles. This may be called the "natural" or merely imitative style, and it is seen in its worst development in some of the articles of form.²

¹ Suga Yasuko, 'Designing the Morality of Consumption: "Chamber of Horrors" at the Museum of Ornamental Art, 1852-53', *Design Issues*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 50-51.

² A Catalogue of the Museum of Ornamental Art, at Marlborough House, Pall Mall, for the Use of Students and Manufacturers, and the Public, (London, 1853), p. 13.

This pre-Greenbergian formalism is reminiscent in Clarke's structure comprising of two leaning triangular 'canvases' on the grounds of the Laban Dance Faculty. They are emptied of the wallpaper design present on the canvases pictured in the pamphlet, itself whilst figurative cannot be considered 'imitative' due to the graphic, blocky and painterly texture of the pattern. The translucent canvases of the shelter, however, become a frame, or a screen, through and within which the viewer, or participant, or even 'sitter', encounters nature first-hand and unmediated. Thus, the field in which the work is situated parallels the expanded field of painting that it engages with.³

While the empty canvases and nettle wallpaper pattern refer to a humble acknowledgement of the unrivalled articulation of nature by nature itself, Clarke's wallpaper design also refers to ideas of humility through reference to the 'lesser' arts. In his lecture, *The Lesser Arts of Life*, delivered before the Trades' Guild of Learning in 1877, William Morris spoke about the differences between what was considered the 'greater' and 'lesser' arts and urged his audience to treat them as part of the same body. His tone, rather than competing to raise the perceived status of the lesser arts to that of the greater arts, was to humbly advocate the importance of the lesser arts to community. In his introduction, he read,

It seems to me that the lesser arts, when they are rejected, are so treated for no sufficient reason, and to the injury of the community; therefore I feel no shame in standing before you as a professed pleader and advocate for them... since it is through them that I am the servant of the public, and earn my living with abundant pleasure.⁴

Morris' self-identification as 'servant of the public' parallels his belief in the lesser arts as building community. Later, Morris defined the greater arts as satisfying people's spiritual wants, whilst the lesser arts' first intention was to 'satisfy their bodily wants.'⁵ Despite this, Morris told the story of the craftsman,

Whose hands were skilled in fashioning things could not help thinking the while, and soon found out that their deft fingers could express some part of the tangle of their thoughts ... in the very labour that they lived by lay the material in which their thought could be embodied; and thus, though they laboured, they laboured somewhat for their pleasure.⁶

Morris reasoned therefore that the lesser arts, like the greater arts, showed traces of the spiritual state of humankind, whilst also meeting their bodily needs. This grouping of the lesser and greater arts can also be detected in Clarke's *Get Down*. In the pamphlet, Clarke wrote,

Work yourself into an ecstatic frenzy, enter a different space, rich and full with meaning, like when you paint. Make a lush wallpaper design, be a humble craftsman, listening to God in his workshop. The lesser arts; barbaric yet righteous, don't push others down to lift yourself up, but be low and lifted up, spiritually.

This sequence conflates the measured, ordered designs of the 'lesser arts' with the emotional or spiritual 'ecstatic frenzy' of the painter or 'high' artist. Here Clarke suggests that a fine artist who paints

³ Craig Staff writes a chapter called 'Painting in the Expanded Field' in his book, *After Modernist Painting*, (I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 49-68.

⁴ William Morris, 'The Lesser Arts of Life', in ed. Reginald Stuart Poole, *Lectures on Art Delivered in Support of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*, (Macmillan and Co., London, 1882), p. 174.

⁵ Morris, 'The Lesser Arts of Life', (1882), p. 176.

⁶ Morris, 'The Lesser Arts of Life', (1882), pp. 176-177.

wallpaper designs, touches upon Morris' advocacy that the Decorative Arts be integrated with the Fine Arts, into a 'great body of art' and the responsibility of the craftsman to perform as an artist.⁷

The location of Clarke's *Be Low* in a stairwell at Worlds End Studios expands upon this relationship between lesser and greater art practices. Set in a fashionable area of Chelsea, Worlds End Studios is a complex of studios, shops and offices primarily occupied by high-end designers and craftsmen and women including jewellers, carpet weavers, glass workers, kitchen fabricators, and clothing and homeware specialists. The installation consists of two three-minute videos, one showing footage of the artist at work and the other showing an animation of a new nettle wallpaper design. Two mounted prints of the rearranged canvases covered in florist wrap also hang on two other landings. Two printed screenplays for the videos are pinned to a cork board on the top floor. Finally, the installation includes a smaller mounted print of the shelter at Laban Dance Faculty and the limited-edition pamphlet *Get Down*. Though inhabiting the realms of 'high' or 'fine' art, *Be Low* occupies an unglamorous, utilitarian stairwell in this building complex. Through his unfunded 'fine' art installation, Clarke's voice echoes round the walls of the lowly thoroughfare, mirroring Morris' exhortations for the lesser arts, as wealthy craftspeople run up and down the stairs, to and from their expensive units, in the middle of projects that manifest Morris' earlier plea. The title, *Be Low*, whilst playing on the idea of looking to the lesser arts and the humble craftsman 'below', also acts as a command to the 'great body of art' both greater and lesser, to be humble in their work.

This demonstrates Clarke's reading of the writings of St Teresa of Avila, particularly *The Interior Castle*, which inspired many of the concerns of the installations. One of the main preoccupations of her text is how one may reach ecstatic spiritual experiences through humble prayer. This pursuit is demonstrated most directly in the pamphlet for *Get Down*, where James writes 'be low and lifted up, spiritually'. Here is the genesis of the title of the subsequent installation, *Be Low*. The notion of reaching ecstatic states through humble meditative acts relates to the humble craftsman who Morris describes finding immense joy in discovering that their 'deft fingers could express some part of the tangle of their thoughts'. Clarke likewise argues that an 'ecstatic frenzy' can be reached through a humble engagement with material labour of the lesser arts and uses the motif of the stinging nettle to elaborate on this idea. Whilst causing discomfort when one rolls around in them, they are beneficial to one's health when drunk as tea, as was demonstrated at *Humble to the Ground* when the artist offered participants cups of the drink in *Get Down*. Clarke presents an extensive list of health benefits in the pamphlet. Similarly, in *The Interior Castle*, St Teresa wrote, 'Humility is the ointment for our wounds [...] God Who is our Physician, will come and heal us.'⁸ Here humility is compared to an ointment which will enable one to transcend their broken state. Like the stinging nettle symbolising humility and how it can heal or elevate the drinker, St Teresa compares humility to a physical ointment that can bring physical or spiritual healing.

These concerns regarding physical and spiritual states are developed through Clarke's use of the levels provided by the location of his installation *Be Low*. The placement of the video showing the artist painting a wallpaper design on the ground floor reflects the 'humble craftsman' in his workshop. This

⁷ William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art*, (Longmans, Green and Co. 1908), p. 4. Chapter 1, 'The Lesser Arts', was delivered by Morris before the Trades' Guild of Learning on December 4, 1877.

⁸ St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), *The Interior Castle*, (Thomas Baker, London, 1921) p. 81.

association of material construction and rearrangement of raw materials with the ground parallels Morris' association of the lesser arts with the bodily, material and physical, as opposed to the greater arts' connection with more immaterial elements such as the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and imaginative. This reference to the artist's physical labour undergoes several translations across different media as the viewer climbs the stairs, creating multiple layers between the imagined and the original physical act. For example, *Be Low 2* and *Be Low 3* reference the original stinging nettles, which have first been translated into a wallpaper design on two triangular canvases. These have then been rearranged, photographed, edited, printed, mounted, wrapped in florist wrap, and finally written about in this essay. Throughout, reference to the nettles is maintained. Similarly, the artist's material act of painting, shown on the ground floor, is filmed, and edited. A screenplay is then written, typed and then printed and accordingly pinned to a board on the top floor above a printer. In "*A Voyage on the North Sea*": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Rosalind Krauss discusses the movement of Art away from traditions of medium-specificity and craftsmanship to the modern and contemporary notion of 'art as idea'.⁹ She uses the example of Marcel Broodthaers' *Museum of Modern Art, Eagles Department*, a sequence of works developed over four years finishing in 1972.¹⁰ In the *Section des Figures (The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present*, Broodthaers submitted more than three hundred different eagles in different forms.¹¹ The eagle, something which soars above, to Broodthaers symbolised 'idea' and paralleled the notion of 'idea' as the artwork, soaring above the material from which it is composed, something which he associated with the ass.¹² Likewise, in Clarke's *Be Low*, the original nettles are translated multiple times into different mediums whilst retaining their reference throughout.

Yet to describe the original encounter with nature that was so present in *Get Down* as 'dematerialised' in *Be Low* would be problematic. While Clarke demonstrates the transcendence of concept from its original materiality, he acknowledges the dependence on materiality to manifest these translations, that one must *use* materiality to transcend the material. In the pamphlet he writes 'How to use materiality to transcend'. *Get Down / Be Low* demonstrates two main solutions. The first is to engage in material work, represented by the humble craftsman, which transports the labourer to strange realms of thought or even ecstasy. The second is to arrange materials in such a way as to imbue an idea or reference which in turn transcends its form, enabling it to be translated or referenced by other material. Clarke's two three-person shows, mirroring the two three-pointed canvases referenced throughout, draw attention to the complex relationships in three major binaries which he demonstratively binds in his work. Whilst drawing attention to the complex relationship between the spiritual and physical, art and craft, and ideas and their material manifestations, Clarke demonstrates their fluidity and interdependence. In the language of a post medium age he describes the import of traditions and techniques of craft. He conflates craft as part of the body of greater arts whilst celebrating its humble estate. Furthermore, Clarke demonstrates the transcendence of an idea beyond its form and physical experience, whilst articulating its dependence on the material.

⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "*A Voyage on the North Sea*" *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, (Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 12.

¹⁰ Krauss, "*A Voyage on the North Sea*" *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, (1999), p. 12.

¹¹ Krauss, "*A Voyage on the North Sea*" *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, (1999), p. 20.

¹² Krauss, "*A Voyage on the North Sea*" *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, (1999), p. 9. Broodthaers' design for the front cover of *Studio International* (October 1974) replaces the 'e' of 'Fine' with an eagle, and the 'A' of 'Arts' with a donkey.