

Slavka Sverakova on the work of Ashley B. Holmes

Spiders and Dust after Anna Akhmatova, is a composite image assembled from different media. The shift towards assemblage became stronger after 2016, its date. On my previous visits to Ashley B. Holmes' studio the paintings and drawings dominated her art practice.



Assemblage developed during the mid 20th C into a dominant form, specifically in Western Europe and USA. However, it has a substantial history, when, during the middle ages it manifested in various reliquary and votive objects and in 19th C accompanied the interest in collecting natural and historical evidence. Assemblage then insisted in its documentary character. Twentieth century established assemblage as equal part of visual art system.



Robert Rauschenberg, Canyon, 1959, Assemblage: oil, housepaint, pencil, paper, fabric, metal, buttons, nails, cardboard, printed paper, photographs, wood, paint tubes, mirror string, pillow & bald eagle on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, accessed on <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/165011>

Holmes does not deny that heritage, as she is motivated by saving all those small moments that make up our “inner” life. The strategy of fragmented whole akin to the satellite view of farmland enables the perception of stability and firmness. It stabilises the composition that appears like a heap of discarded cut outs, shredded paper with haphazard text. This and muted foggy area are pushed back by clarity of the pattern in a scale that pushes it forward between the picture plane and observers eye. Illusion is not limited, having received permission to defining the fragment of the house. As the above title suggests, the assemblage is a visual, visible, impact of poetry on its reader. In that sense it is confessional, like any Tracey Emin’s art. Moreover - it differs in reaching out to wider issues of freedom of thought, for which Anna Achmatova was persecuted. For me the “shredded” paper refers to her poems being written on tiny pieces of paper distributed between her friends.

Akhmatova's close friend, chronicler Lydia Chukovskaya described how writers working to keep poetic messages alive used various strategies. A small trusted circle would, for example, memorise each other's works and circulate them only by oral means. She tells how Akhmatova would write out her poem for a visitor on a scrap of paper to be read in a moment, then burnt in her stove. The poems were carefully disseminated in this way, however it is likely that many compiled in this manner were lost. "It was like a ritual," Chukovskaya wrote. "Hands, matches, an ashtray. A ritual beautiful and bitter."

Each person carried and cared for one line - and thus the poem existed as secret connection between the people. Holmes assemblage shares Akhmatova’s belief that a small detail could evoke range of associations.

The piece of wallpaper is presented out of the normal scale and thus becomes a pointer to something untoward, extraordinary and tragic. Observer cannot see it whole- just torn and fragmented for ever. Holmes reverts to acrylic on canvas in a “portrait” of Akhmatova titled

House Head Anna Akhmatova, 2017, (25 x 20 x 5cm)



The strategy of incongruity used to be in the domain of surrealism, whereas here, Holmes is firmly giving it the visual acuity of the real, not imagined, occurrence. It is not difficult to perceive the “house” as a modern milliners creation (Philip Treacy come to mind). The composition and proportions follow an old photograph of the poet, including the motive of pearls.



(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/11532201/Modigliani-and-the-Russian-beauty-the-affair-that-changed-him.html>)

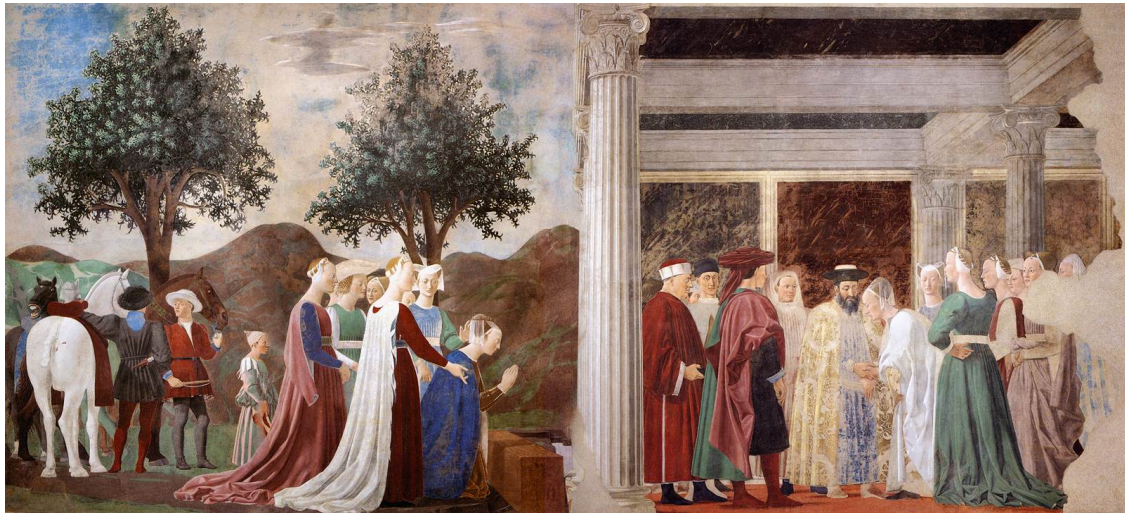


House Head Anne Sexton, 2017, acrylic on canvas, diameter 30cm, departs the safety of classical compositional practices. It is neither central, nor diagonal. A particular quote from Sexton's poetry comes to mind: "Live or die, but don't poison everything". Holmes chose a metaphor of balance - balancing a multitude of small differences. Every building displays family resemblance and different size and/ or angle. Precariously held together they all betray their insecurity in "pure visuality" (term coined by Henri Focillon in *La Vie des Formes*, 1934). The black ground embodies an aspiration, a longing, to be seen and to increase the visibility of the portrait.



(image accessed online viz Anne Sexton/oceanof meanings....)

Catching the sitter with a circular lens of a camera increases the casual occurrence of what is seen. Unaware, the person carries impossible construct and moves in a parallel space from the observer. As if it were a part of performance, or documentation, or a meeting someone outside the frame. The clarity of outline and definition of detail evokes memory of renaissance frescoes. Like those in the basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo.



(accessed on https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer_m/z.html) **Piero della Francesca painted (1455-66) a cyclus of Adoration of the cross and meeting of Solomon and Queen Sheba.** She and the women around her wear elaborate head covers - a softer version of Holmes's spiky choice.

The rondo wiggled out of favour for centuries, after the family of artists, Luca and Andrea della Robbia, made it ubiquitous in their superb majolicas.



(Accessed on https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spedale_degli_Innocenti)

Some simpler rondos on the facade of the **Ospedale dei innocenti in Florence** also housed just one item - the statue of an orphaned baby.



Circular and elliptical shapes these days appear more often outside painting and sculpture, in installations and performance art.

However, it is the shape and volume Holmes exercises her freedom with.

Celestial, 2017, mixed media assemblage, 18 x 17 cm



Introduces a shape expected more in sculpture or bas relief than in painting. The right angled part holds the inverted silhouette of the house above covered with pattern that may be based on plants or on micro life. Significantly, the right angle acts as a safe ground for the circular form behind the fully three-dimensional house. Irregular outline adds organic feel to the shape that manages to be both behind the white house and above it. Nice illusion. And poetic impact - in comparison for example with Frank Stella who exercised wilder choices of grounds for his paintings. Holmes asks the imagined volume, construed by the interaction of dark and light, to embrace the memory of the house, to forge an empathy.

Frank Stella shreds the outline as well as the volume, real and imagined, to imprison a movement in unmovable object. Note that the Stella's composition sits in front of a blue circle... which associates for me with the Earth and Giotto di Bondone. If I read the right angle as left arm touching the funnel morphs into a fan, and the largest stripy form becomes reminiscent of a dancing body. Dancing to something like a jazz music. Holmes's Celestial evokes dark universe, its apparent (but not real) stasis and silence. Static and silent like a deep memory. The black is eminently capable of denying the eye to know how deep. Unsettling questioning follows - who are

the denizens of the house and of the universe? Holmes replicates - possibly unaware and without any collateral damage - Stella's meme of abstract "information", mediated by a pattern and packed with an attitude. Her pattern is remembered wallpaper - something she lived with. Her object is the house she knew well. In the way her assemblages are based on what she remembers from her own life- her art is confessional, but less dramatically than Sexton's poetry.



Frank Stella, The Quadrant, 1987. Accessed on <https://www.sfmoma.org>.

In 2018 Holmes finished several "boxes" reviving the mode of visual art favoured century in and century out, and revived by Joseph Cornell, hailed in 2015 exhibition as a pioneer of assemblage art (<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/joseph-cornell-shadow-boxes-assemblage-art>)

An early example confesses to the link with renaissance - a strategy entertained by Holmes in relation to preference for profile, rondo and high visibility.

Joseph Cornell, Pinturicchio Boy, 1942-52 (accessed online on Pinturicchio Boy, 1942 -52k6dcuvrdn3lc0ajxyhgb.jpg)



Holmes uses perspex boxes to house an assemblage of her own paintings in layers over one another. **Blue Carnation, 2018, assemblage of paintings in perspex box 38 x 32 x 5 cm**, allows the house to become a dominant meme travelling from assemblage to an assemblage. Here, the black hole of its shape and size is turned upside down, as if the hole swallowed the memory of that home. The sunny white washed gabled home is both stable and in danger of disappearing. Outside scraps of indoors decoration and stylised rendering of a corner of the garden emphasize that what I see is not real. Transformed, it still is affirmation of something whole, complete and absolute as well as a manifestation of free and exalted memory.



My last example carries a dark awareness that a fragment of being exposes its power to draw attention to the entire being:

The Weight that Drown Him, 2018, assemblage of paintings in perspex box, 38 x 32 x 5 cm



The house is almost all under water, drowned, too many cats watch out as if hypnotising the viewer to believe their playful innocence. The biggest one, however, devours one of the playful yellow birds that forge a decorative garland around the flood and the kill. The red and pink plants are least stylised, thus pronouncing that life goes on. Holmes gives unusual prominence to stylised row of yellow birds at the bottom edge of the composition - they look like clones of one particular one, maybe the one killed by the white cat ... or not. The small cats also look like copy of one another. What is this stylistic strategy doing? It replicates a pattern, does not deviate from a selected norm, hence it draws attention to itself - to the sameness. Through repetition it removes the prominence of the animals and birds, violating the invitation to celebrate life. Instead the poetic rhythm of the repeat makes a syncopated pattern that transcends both the narrative and decorative function. And then - the awareness of the chromatics of the hues wrestles in its meaning: the white, black and red are the messengers of life: light/day, dark/ night and fire or blood. The yellow and black signal danger in nature...(think a wasp). Holmes anchors the painting to the natural world by giving prominence to the relationship between mute hues, by economy of mental process, in order to overturn habitual thought. With relative ease. Not something to dismiss. Herbert Spencer made song and dance in 1882 about the efficiency of the composition and economy of creative effort. Holmes explores the promise made by universal elements in her experiences (like David Hume) to forge immediate, non discursive experience for the viewer. There is either interesting idea, an unusual subject or wonderful workmanship.

Throughout, her paintings harbour a secret, often painted as a dark area in a shape of what was observed, remembered or imagined. A ravine of nothingness - waiting to receive something valuable, like a home or a bird, unsettling any rational relationship, beyond the one felt in our moments of doubt and insecurity. Her most recent painting issues a new status for what is not believable. Like Escher, Holmes aims at persuasion. All is as it is.



Turning to the middle ground, between dark and light, the grey offers some soothing mid existence. All is in high light but not brimming with activity. Except, puzzling gestural marks that refuse any illusion of depth or modelling. Together with the patterns they appear above the horizon. The grey ground painted flat borrows the illusion of receding depth from the rather aggressive angles of the patterned "shadow". The house and its mirror image appear in crisp light coming from the left. Consequently, the shadow is in a wrong place, as is the grey watchman of a pattern standing on the horizon line while morphing into an alien tree. It celebrates the power of irrational thought as an inquisitor.

What if ... prevails over what is.

And that is the realm of the mute poetry.