

# FrameWork 11/17

Katie Bethune-Leamen on Sandra Meigs

## The canny valley.<sup>1</sup>

*Forms before form is an idea in your head.*

*Disappearance. Trace.*

*Tappity-tap. Automaton.*

*Making out with a rock. vs. Making out with The Rock.<sup>2</sup>*

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### THE PAINTINGS UPSTAIRS

When I was a child, the occasional old man I would meet (a farmer at a rural Manitoba fair, or someone's grandfather), upon learning my name would sing me a song that went "Katie, K-K-K-Katie, you're the only girl that I adore. When the moon shines, over the cow shed, I'll be waiting at the kitchen door." One day recently I realised no one had sung me that song in a while. And I looked it up. It was popular during WWI. The old men who had known that song in the summer of their youth had by now mostly died.

Things that you don't understand (also) disappear.

I won't lie; I love ~~B-U-D-D-Y~~ Carlos Castaneda. Fairytale or (exploitative?) social anthropology, his writing really excited me when I first read his *Don Juan* books as an overreaching kid. And again more recently.

Following is a passage I want to reference, but cannot Google—it's just not coming up. So we are going to have to go with my attempt at memory/summary:

During one of his psychotropic sessions with Don Juan, Castaneda remembers a moment from his childhood wherein he experienced sunlight saturating the kitchen he was in, sitting on the floor, playing under the table and chairs. A time in childhood before language; adult Castaneda recalls the warm, glowing pillars that rose above him before he knew them as 'table' and 'chair' or even visual form distinct from other phenomena. The warmth. The suffused glow. And understands his experiential relation to that moment as a child outside of language, outside of social order (amongst other things).



<sup>1</sup> Chatting with my friend, David Court, about CG Sean Young in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and he says "like there's no more uncanny valley." And we were both like "yeah, a canny valley?"

<sup>2</sup> Same conversation. Same friend. I told him that the previous night I had a dream in which I'd made out with The Rock. I could tell by David's response to the statement that he'd misheard me as saying "made out with a rock." He was totally disappointed when I clarified.

## THEIR PALETTE

You know how contemporary scholarship has told us that Classical Greek statuary was painted?—garish and whatnot. Polychromed.



And so: the funniness of a palette altering through time and being understood differently by subsequent generations.

Then having to wonder about other palettes you know and how they've altered.

All the nursery furniture you've seen from middle class and working class homes in North America in the 1920s, 30s, 40s, 50s that had those high gloss, faded pinks and blues and yellows and greens. Did they start off that darkened pastel pallor? Or is that uniform fading and deepening? I actually think it's the former. Actually I am really not sure. But wow they are melancholy colours.

## THEIR IMAGERY

Those transfers that were used seemingly ubiquitously on such children's furniture. By the time of my childhood, sitting on a passed down tiny chair or something or other (doll's crib?) and the transfer has worn off in areas. Paper thin, full colour. But muted colour. Yellowed because the transfer has itself yellowed. (Or is it a varnish that has?) Such a specific thinness and sense of it being a transfer film.

Happy imagery of big-eyed lambs. The dish and the spoon. Little children. Dolls. Teddy bears. Ducklings. Baby bunnies. You know the score.

But somehow because of the genesis of the imagery, they also manage to summon a feeling of that infamous 19<sup>th</sup> c. German language children's book *Der Struwwelpeter*. Why is it such a *thing*?! Although, really—deservedly so. It is totally weird and awesome.

## THEIR SHAPES

An early memory of an alarming monster down the hall from my bedroom in the darkness of a nighttime that upon awakening is noticed to be an enamelled green spherical BBQ unit momentarily moved inside from the apartment patio. No lingering fear or bad feelings—just a moment of realisation.



This plus the Castaneda reference above.

Dissemblance of form. But is it dissemblance before knowledge? No way, right?

The wholeness of the object. The body of it. The magic.

I had a blanket that had silk trim with illustrations printed on it. The trim was coming off. My grandmother asked me to hand the blanket to her, that she would fix it. Which she did by ripping off the trim and throwing it in the garbage. The intense SHOCK of that previously unimaginable gesture (not intended to be violent).

The violence to the body (of the object).

### DOWNSTAIRS THINGS

Café Jasmin in Munich, unchanged since 1952. Decorated in olives. Burnished golds. Demure faded rose. (Realm of impeccable ladies. Skirt suits. Hats. Coffee taken in the afternoon with a friend. A very tidy fantasy world.)

That complete Art Nouveau, Mucha-designed jewellery store installed in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, and that Art Nouveau sitting room at the Musée d'Orsay too.

Details etched more permanently in a commercial establishment—name set in terrazzo at the entrance, painted in gold letters on the door, crafted out of metal as ornamental grate work.



That Verner Panton fabric and rug pattern.

Peacock feather eyes.<sup>3</sup>

### A THING ABOUT SCALE, AND OTHER THINGS

The experience of adult scale as a child—everything rather high up. People's heads—adult heads—high up. Very easy to reach up and if not paying proper attention, grab the wrong dangling adult



hand. Not notice, call the hand person “mommy” and someone—the horror!—laughs at you.

An Alpen walking stick! (Paul McCarthy & Mike Kelley's *Heidi* works). For sure I think it is a walking stick because of the little leather loop on the handle.

Loden green rough woven wool top. Also totally Alpen. Alpine. Wait, is the first just the name of the cereal? Oops—Alpine. No, I looked it up—it's ok, both 'Alpen' and 'Alpine' are apropos.

<sup>3</sup> (Dear low-level online news writer whose story I unintentionally scanned: Why would you be so casual writing about the peacock at the zoo, being put into different quarters for the winter, but escaping into the lion pen, only to be immediately killed and devoured? This is a bummer on so many levels.)

Hand carved wooden buttons on distressingly placketless shirt.

This placketlessness is threat—there is subterfuge: buttons unnecessary, now ornament.

Tappity finger. TAP TAP TAP. Witch finger beckoning. Large man taps on glass of phone booth I'm in with knife tip as he's anxious to make a call now please. (It is very motivating.)

Ogilvy's department store in Montreal. Seems impossibly quaint now. How is it still open? Does the Black Watch bagpiper still march through at night and pipe the store shut? Their 1940s Steiff holiday window display. I mean: WOW. A whole department store windowfull of animatronic Steiff stuffed animals in a winter wonderland. Worn. Still going. (Ok. I just looked it up—apparently it was completely overhauled in 2008.)

Have you seen that 18<sup>th</sup> c. automaton at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London? The 'man-eating' tiger doing what we think it does best, and slaying a hapless (murdering) gentleman?<sup>4</sup> The tiger part of the automaton device chomps into the neck of an automaton English soldier, who emits scream sounds through a hidden bellows device. It is almost full scale. This is most delightful! That someone thought to make this. Wanted it made.

In stores, if I got separated from my mom, one strategy was to get down on my hands and knees to find her shod feet visible somewhere under a faraway display unit or rack. This entailed having to take note of what shoes she was wearing when we left the house in the morning.

My mom had a raincoat. One day I cut a tiny crescent out of its hemline with a pair of nail scissors. I brought that up recently—we had never spoken of it—she remembered seeing the little lunette of defacement and just sort of accepting it as a random thing one of her kids had done.

The wholeness of the object.

The squeeze around the display: façade. The back. Exposure at the back: structure.

To be one who makes things.

The wholeness of the object (when a child).

To be one who makes things (as an adult).

I once made a very, very large sculpture. At the reception for it, artist Kim Adams said to me "Thank you for making large sculpture." Which felt great. That is the feeling *The Glass Ticker* gave me: thank you feelings.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently the English in India were responsible for the deaths of almost 40,000 thousand tigers. Which, if we like, we can take as a brutal metonym for the larger problem at hand. The didactic information on the Victoria & Albert Museum's website regarding the object certainly likes the idea of synecdoche here.



What is this store? It is called COSMOS. Labelled COSMOS. I am 100% going in that shop.