

Linda Aloysius: 'To Keep Standing'

by

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Perforated (from the ongoing series New Model Army), photographed 18th February, 2017, on Silver Road, Lewisham, London, SE13, just outside the boundary of V22 artists' studio complex Axion House, which was closed a few days later, following the sale of the site for property development.

‘...the layer of words had been removed from things...he had just learned all of that with that woman: how to keep standing when one has a body.’ (1)

Pedestal, platform, podium... the figure stands erect, ready to be viewed, to be visible, to be admired, to be heard. In Linda Aloysius’ *Land Operation: New Model Army*, 2017, the untitled sculptures stand singly and in pairs, at human height, crafted from materials rescued from London’s streets. Aloysius takes the used fixtures and fittings of an analogue 20th century and animates them into upright, decidedly female figures. Some, such as the doubled oblong pieces of white pegboard, lean doughtily back; others, like the faux leather bench that oozes stuffing from its split side, struggle to remain intact; while others boast a casual belt of string or wire around their waist, as if to declare some sort of succour from adornment.

Nearly all of the figures stand footed by clumps of rough cement which suggests that they cannot be lifted by flights of fancy or follow their own creative ambitions. It’s hard not to read a gathered pair of net curtains hung at mid-torso as a skirt, or to assign a set of small, voile sacs slung around a neck as an accessory, pointing to the frailty and charming vigour of human vanity. The figures lean towards narrative, barely resisting an anthropomorphic reading, seeming to strain towards connection, both determined and daunted. Many exude the damage of doubt, yet an aura of industrial-strength perseverance persists.

Qualities of standing are central to this work: standing up to, standing out, withstanding. The figures’ poses assert resilience and resistance – like those women in black and white wartime photographs who scoured the streets for coal, clad in aprons and bedroom slippers.

‘Sometimes the woman appears in a grainy haze. Her iconographic details are clear: the white cloth of her dress; the sly hook of her finger in the folds of her skirt; the curve of her mouth when she turns.’ (2)

In *The Woman Without Experiences*, dedicated to 'mothers in creation in myth, history and daily life', Patricia Dienstfrey (quoted above) explores the mother that haunts, hinders and tries to make company with the daughter, the writer. The writer describes the envy of men and male writers she feels from a young age as a 'legless feeling, a way she has of seeing herself in the world as not having.' (3) Does lack define the femininity of the pose in Aloysius' sculptures? Is it the dress-like shape, the futility of the fabric to adorn, the tilting posture that veers between flirt, hesitation and questioning? These figures are undoubtedly feminized and why am I reluctant to admit or address this reading, this identification that is me and I, it? Of it. I can only describe the drag of ambivalence in self-identification as a woman, a could-be mother, a worker, a lover and then

...the quick of recovery, the recognition of the rich hidden force that lies beyond the poverty of gendered display and disguise. This is the nub of Aloysius' work: the relief at detecting an obscured, inner, elegant whole. A stance. What survives in long-standing. (4)

What the figures stand for is less the autobiography of a female life, than some moment of consciousness embodied in the female form. It is this differentiation that drove Lyn Hejinian's autobiographical sequence of prose poems called *My Life*, first published in 1980. Concerned with the fluidity of the self, Hejinian constructed a non-linear series of lyrical sentences which refused a chronology or standard time frame narrative. As Lucy Sheerman suggests in an essay on Hejinian's work: 'The attempt to write the spaces which separate inner from outer or self from other is also an attempt to read the broken pieces of existence.' (5)

Something about the 'broken pieces of existence' is poignantly explored in Aloysius' sculptures. They exude a sense of partial repair and an ability to continue to perform womanhood despite the immense exposure to vulnerability, inequality and exhaustion. These figures know the gestures required to sustain

their own female fiction - a lick of lipstick; a scarf, jaunty, at the neck; a string of diamanté – our provisional application of the daily construction of gender.

Some of Aloysius' figures stand like sculptures and some stand like ideas for sculptures that are yet to be fully realized, just as we often stand somewhere between the designation 'woman' and the experience of it. Some stand before what could be a mirror, or a painting, or a door opening into somewhere else: a marriage, a divorce, an escape, a career, a book published, a solo exhibition, a chance of correlation between her and us, us and them. Together they form an army of solidarity, speaking the unspoken, worn secrets of femininity and labour that so often create and sustain family. As Hejinian concludes in her groundbreaking poem: 'These creatures are compound and nothing they should do should surprise us. I don't mind, or I won't mind, where the verb "to care" might multiply.' (6)

- (1) Lispector, Clarice, *The Apple in the Dark* (London: Virago Press, 1985) p.108
- (2) Dienstfrey, Patricia, *The Woman Without Experiences* (Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press, 1995), p.70
- (3) Ibid. p.5
- (4) In email correspondence with the artist, 20/03/2017 the artist makes clear: 'The works are not only about surviving. They also have just enough of a foothold into the future to suggest the possibility of going forward, of hope.'
- (5) Sheerman, Lucy, 'Tricks of Memory in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* from *Long Poem Magazine, Issue 12*
- (6) Hejinian, Lyn, from the section 'As for we who "love to be astonished"', in *My Life* (USA: Burning Deck Magazine, 1980)