

Porphyry's Gnat

*"The artist is the one in whom the new world, the possible world, is not a mere idea, nor a phantasy or imagining, but an embodied way of living the creative spirit."*¹

Porphyry's Gnat, the latest installation by Elizabeth Woods, seems to ask more questions than it provides answers to. It is a multi-layered work with a range of crossing conceptual bases. It is at once what it seems to be – a sculptural installation in which a motor car sits rearing up onto rocks like a wacky 'Monarch of the Glen' around and atop of which perch a murder of crows. Is this the aftermath of something unaccountable which resists a fixed conclusion? Perhaps. It clearly evokes the surreal in that it is certainly entirely real, as installations must be, but it is also a fantasy – entirely a construction of the imagination, springing forth like a dream (that other space where the real and the imagined are integrated and co-existent).

The various elements of this work are indeed significant although the signification reads out of known connections into different ones when the elements are co-related in this way. What is the link between the parts? The artist creates a connection between the crows and pregnant women, between the funereal aspects of the crows and opening event and the fecundity of the women, between a 1960s Japanese car and the 'constructed' rocks on which it sits, between an artistic presentation and a raffle.

Who is Porphyry and what is the Gnat? Porphyry (AD 234–c. 305, his date of death is uncertain), was a 3rd century Neo Platonist and is represented by the car, a vehicle as Porphyry is himself is a 'vehicle', at the same time a visionary perhaps? The artist cites Porphyry as 'regarding the artist as a visionary who experiences the world as between states of the norm and the new, whose experiences are caught in (and between?) two worlds,' leading to the artist imagining alternate states.

To the ancients the gnat encapsulated that which was an often irreconcilable, troublesome element – a thorn in the side. This could exist in the form of a person, a belief or a course or pattern of action. For Woods, the Gnat, in this case, is centred on the commodification of art. If art's highest aspiration and function is the uplifting of the spirit (here it may be worth noting that Porphyry's teacher was Cassius Longinus, who wrote the first treatise on the Sublime), and the evocation of emotional states and ultimately a transformational force, then art as commodity is its lowest state.

The car (a commodity), becomes then an ironic, clumsy representation of the philosopher-as-vehicle, at the same time a wacky, cartoonish image of this as *his* car – as if he may be inhabiting it as a spirit (his actual death of course was never verified...).

The crows sit and observe, associated often with death (the death of Porphyry's vision?), they also carry the opposite association in different cultural contexts. In Buddhist teaching the presence of crows at a birth presages the *birth* of a visionary.

The car is to be raffled, if it is a commodity then let that be, the material object of desire will be won and the 'sculpture' will be driven away, no longer art....or is it? If it has become art does it not remain art?

¹ Note from the artist.

Elizabeth Woods values art as the active transaction of ideas, of feelings between people. She values also its transformative qualities, and its transcendental aspects. This may involve the application of ritual, and the magical too, even if this is merely the juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar, the new combining what is and what has been imagined.

This work differs from much of Woods' recent practice in that it does not engage with or involve a community in its developing and production. It is a more complex and personal statement, as such it is also more equivocal in that its myriad and shifting relations and allusions submit to no sense of general comprehension or agreement. It connects strongly with the shamanic artist tradition. Is not every artist a shaman? Do we ever really understand the utterances of the shaman entirely?

When the word is made flesh, the meanings are far from definitive. We all regard the singular phenomenon from a different aspect, and with different eyes, formed by different minds and completed by different experiences. Despite the faintly 'ridiculous' nature of this installation, its gently humorous message is a deeply serious one. The society which devalues the significance of its visionaries, or fails to hear their words dooms itself to stupidity, to mediocrity and to stagnation.

*"They (the visionaries), begin to experience the coming of the new world as a tension within the old that is so real and tangible it can be represented symbolically as a gnat. In the ancient world the gnat was evoked to symbolise the incursion of a divine spirit onto the mortal."*²

The artist makes a proposition, not an explanation. The object carries within its materiality space for engagement, space for speculation, space for vision.

The artist may seem to be the embodiment of the visionary but visionaries exist in many places amid many areas of human activity.

Seán Kelly, Curator

² Note from the artist.