

RELICS OF THE MIND

KATHARINE DOWSON

GV ART & ARTAKT

TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT

MARINA WALLACE

Relics of the Mind is based on the concepts of holding on and letting go. References are rich, and both personal experiences and social rituals play an important part in the making of the artworks. With a profound take on ownership and the sharing of property, Katharine Dowson reflects on what happens when we hold onto our identity through ownership of objects, and then let go by ‘passing on’ our dearest possessions. For Dowson, toys and memories are cast, recorded and displayed almost as sacrificial offerings, or as votive images that have been submitted to an alchemical purification. The transformation causes the artifacts to undergo a subtle process of distortion. In *Never Letting Go*, the distortion is physical (the melting of the acrylic blocks) but also psychological: we remember differently from our siblings or from our friends, sizes change, shapes are not the same, even dates and names differ. The limited capacity of our memory alters the substance and the appearance of what we remember. Zooming in from the large picture to the detail is what Dowson does in order to better store her impressions, her memories: she collects in order to recollect. Fragments of the past are constantly recalled, and pulled through to the present in varying ways. Memories appear, and emerge with a truth that is subjective and often deceptive. They are malleable, change shape, get distorted and adapt to whatever mental space is made for them. Our sense of self and identity surfaces from this process. The world of memories populates the senses and is in turn populated by them, by its images and objects.

The idea of the human body as a *lesser world* – seen as such according to the ancient concept of macrocosm and microcosm – has engaged Katharine Dowson for

many years, culminating in her contribution to the landmark exhibition, *Spectacular Bodies, The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now* (Hayward Gallery, London, 2000–01). So have lenses, glass, transparent, and translucent materials; the artist is as fascinated by the properties of the eye that allow adjustments to changes of vision, as she is by the ability of the mind to adapt and mould itself in the creative process. Dowson's work in the exhibition *Head On, Art with the Brain in Mind* (Science Museum, London, 2003) was testimony to her interest in the mind and its cognitive functions. For her, glass and transparent materials are *membranes*. Glass has a life of its own: it moulds itself into characteristic shapes thus evoking memory's processes of impression and recall, replication and change. For years, Dowson constructed forms that rely both on transparency and translucency. She uses materials that allow light to pass through, playing with the opposing qualities of clarity and distortion, with which her sculptures, objects that are often cast and seen through lenses, may be distinguished.

In her recent work, and moving on from her fascination with anatomy, flesh and bones of the human body, the artist's focus has transferred on the workings of the mind: not only is she preoccupied as she was in the past with particular cognitive functions, such as dyslexia, but the lesser world has now become for Dowson that of memories and fragments of the past set against the illusionary wholeness of the present. She perceives the persistence of memories, their 'forget-me-not' status, as a necessary and desirable condition.

In her new work, Dowson takes us on a psychological journey by constructing forms that celebrate human identity in its most poignant way, electing to create beautiful and heroic busts of individuals trapped at some point between life and death. *Silent Stories* is an installation of a series of very moving portraits of patients who have journeyed through radiotherapy sessions administered for head and neck cancer. The sculptures silently line up just as patients do, all with their inner stories and experiences embedded in the translucent glass. Ancient Roman busts are a strong point of reference, their composed stare and the detailed

rendering of humble as well as imperial features have enriched the artist's references for her own work. The dignity proper of the ancient portrait pervades these portraits too.

Realised not in marble, but in glass, *Silent Stories* sit proud, each on its plinth, but all linked together by a common story. *Vanitas* are delicate sculptures made from faces of skin cancer patients. With both works, the glass is cast from the plaster forms used to make the transparent shells that patients wear during radiotherapy treatment to mark and direct the position of the beam shielding the rest of the face. Dowson says of her sculptures that the glass is a metaphor for the imperfection and fragility of life; the rough casts reflect the quality of the original plaster casts, which are designed only as a platform for making the final shell. They are discarded in the medical laboratories, but incidentally record as a portrait a moment of great personal vulnerability. The absence in some of the top of the head and eyes, suggests a narrative that goes against the portrait tradition, where eyes are considered crucial to capture the person's identity. To see through the glass from both sides encourages the viewer to ask questions about the person's inner self. The outer side of the face is shaped by time and life events and it represents the façade we manifest to the outside world. Looking through the back, we can see the inner world of hopes and dreams and ask ourselves if those have been fulfilled; in some of the glass heads, a younger self looks back from inside out. A sense of reversing life and experience is present in Dowson's works in glass. What if we could take our 'masks' and turn them inside out? What inner worlds would emerge, what old signs would disappear to make space for new ones? This is what happens in the greatest moments in life, when illness or death threaten our daily habits and change the meaning of life, literally turning it inside out.

In this exhibition, Katharine Dowson exposes her travel account from personal diary after a shipwreck in Kenya in 1991. The scroll is cast from her diary. Her *memoirs* are literally transcribed in glass, almost psychologically put away, 'framed', leaving room for new ones to unfold in real life and real time. These 'memory scrolls' are



Patient 5, 2010

reliquaries of past narratives, of hidden thoughts nurtured whilst clinging onto a plank and nearly drowning. The glass suggests the vulnerable nature of floating in the deep waters of the sea, of being dependent on the currents that eventually washed Dowson and her ship wrecked companions ashore a rock populated with black birds that attacked them in the cold night. Literally almost 'drowning' in her thoughts, the artist marked this experience as a fundamental one in her life, metaphors of life and death floating on the surface. The glass scrolls recall wax tablet, a powerful metaphor for memory that, like that of mental storage space, has persisted in varied forms from the ancient Greeks to present-day. 'Earlier we constructed a block of wax in our minds ...' Similarly, face masks used in radiotherapy against skin and head and neck cancer, to protect as well as map patient's facial topographies, are cast in glass – becoming an 'impression' of the expression of a face, a record of the signs left by time, solid but fragile, glass that takes the place of skin, impermeable but penetrable by light, a skin that allows views through to another invisible world. Like the glass scrolls, the *Silent Stories* glass masks tell of a personal journey through cancer. Each head, each face suggests a story: the portraits, cast in glass, are displayed in a celebratory way, as if they had emerged from history as archaeological remains. They recall portraits and cameos, busts and effigies of citizens of ancient civilisations related to our own, our relatives, seen through the mist of time. Their hidden stories, muffled by the glassy features, speak to us, almost whispers of a common past or a time still to come. We are all travelling across a similar path, face to face with one another, or all in a line waiting our turn.

Objects help us identify who we are, and, since infancy, our attachment to them is part of the business of being human. The ultimate objects of our personal history are childhood toys, objects of the past par excellence. Toys provide the child with tactile cues, and, through regular and frequent use, they end up taking on a whole series of emotions that become embedded within them. Any thing can also turn into an object of the past, altering the way in which we interact with it as we turn it into a memory toy. As metaphors of the mind, toys and other objects stand for our emotions, and the processes of acquisition and de-acquisition are imbued



My Diaries, Lamu, 2010

with emotional worlds. An object, a toy on its own, may offer the possibility of a more or less accurate re-description of the past allowing us to re-imagine and reconstruct past sensations as well as past events. It is this potentially inexhaustible process of mental associations triggered by physical objects that is the fuel for the imagination, future actions and creative acts. As time passes, through the contemplation of objects our mental wanderings give rise to new opportunities for reflection. We can re-describe our past experiences, bringing to light unrealised links between agents, actors, circumstances, motives or objects, by drawing connections.

The coherence of memories, the corralling of objects that help us reconstruct the past is a strong base for our sense of self. Equally, we believe that freeing ourselves from the attachment to material objects represents a heightened state of mind, a higher level of being. How do objects structure family memory? What are the psychological and mnemonic stakes of taking them out of family homes, and displaying them for public consumption? Might freezing the memories in acrylic blocks, bringing the toys into public view and 'framing' them for their iconic and testimonial value allow for a safer treatment of the memories themselves? As relics of the mind Dowson's objects occupy a new space within which they are exposed, sealed from the inevitable transformations of time and thus sanctified, protected and revered in a new way.

In her personal life, Dowson considers the shedding of old toys and objects that are part of our every day life, that silently sit on shelves waiting to serve us, a virtually impossible task. The title of Dowson's works, cast from some of the old toys of her two boys, *Never letting go*, signals the great difficulty of letting go of the children's past remembered in the form of toys. Rather than throwing away the toys as her children grow up, Dowson attempts to 'give them away' to allow them to have a second round of usage, and a second life. She also acquires used toys from charity shops for their own stories and histories: she feels that the discarded toys may have taken on the spirit of the child who played with them.



Never Letting Go (Coloured Stacking Rings), 2010

Although the colour and material of the original objects have been changed – from face masks used in radiotherapy to children’s toy railway tracks – the visual references are still recognizable. ‘Unsuitable’ toys emerge from the moulds, glass being no proper material to be used for safe play. Toys are ‘trapped’ in acrylic blocks, disfigured and insulated from the touch of time. Like precious jewels of memory, the resulting sculptures serve as reminders of the fragility of ownership. The psychological journeys are partly visible on the masks and invisible but implied in the glass railway tracks, cast from the artist’s own children’s old toys, where the absence of the train is evident as is the reference to the child’s journey that starts and continues with no known or fixed destination and in continuous transformation.

The questions Dowson elicits again and again in her process of making sculpture are: how do objects carry memory across space and time? How do they mediate loss and forgetting, exile and diaspora? More than props or exhibits of historical evidence, material objects are inscribed with the physical and affective traces of memorial transmission across cultures and generations. Objects mediate memory in familial and social life, and in public collections; they are used, ‘played with’, collected, exchanged and exhibited.

In their entirety, the works on show speak of an ‘inner life’, of psychological processes that are trapped in membranes of outward actions and a concatenation of thoughts. Tracks without a train, masks without a face, writings with no ink on paper, and toys that are no longer to be played with: these are Dowson’s metaphors for memories as relics of the mind. Our desperate attempt at rescuing our memories and their objects is often in vain. In selecting what to keep and what to give away we can exercise the ultimate wisdom. As when we judge what to leave in and what to take out in the making of a work of art, so we must judge wisely what to do with the contents of our home, when the house is sold, or where to place the objects in a drawer, when the owner is no longer. We must decide what is in and what is out, what we take with us, and what we leave and pass on. Take it or leave it, the process is human, at times cruel and unforgiving, but inevitable,

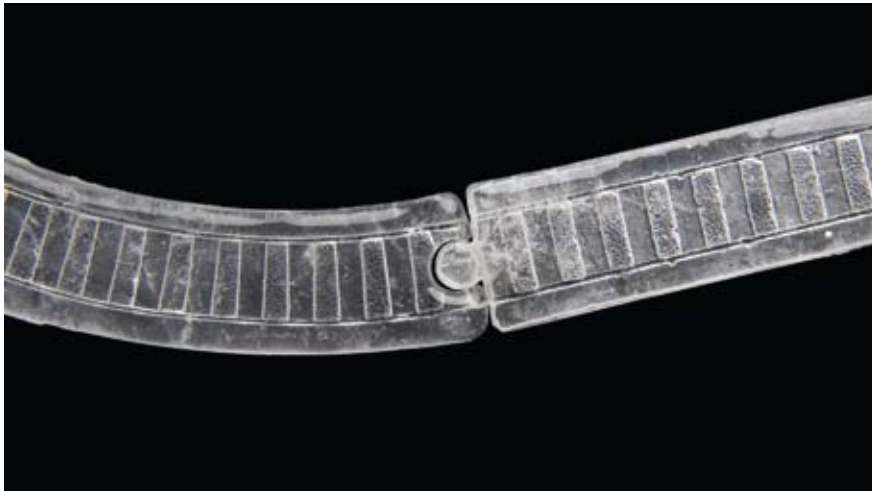


Faded Memories (clear truck), 2010

and it is up to us – personally and socially – to operate a transformation that is creative rather than destructive. Dowson offers a great conceptual unity through aesthetic variety, and the narrative unfolds almost invisibly, leaving tracks on which to run our minds.

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1. Plato, Theaetetus, cited in *Douwe Draaisma, Metaphors of the Mind, A History of Ideas about the Mind*, Cambridge, 2000, p.46,



Life's Journey, 2010, *detail*

HOW OUR MEMORY CREATES OURSELVES

VOLKER SOMMER

Without one or the other limb or organ, we could still make do: we would still remain who we are. However, our very identities would be shattered if we were to lose what we know about ourselves. Memory – and, in particular, autobiographical memory (ABM) – is thus a central tool through which our brain creates a concept of ‘self.’ Our mind is a store of things remembered, and we are that repository.

Encounters with Katharine Dowson’s art will therefore be framed and constrained by our existing memories. Coming face to face with the artist’s ‘relics of the mind’ – as she aptly calls them – our brain will instantly turn into an archaeologist’s and dig something up from our own mental storage. What might be caught in the web of our neurons once we meet Dowson’s acrylic displays of toys, the glass impressions of face masks and the lenses that play with light?

The whole shebang that populates our thoughts makes sense only against a wallpaper of memories. However, unlike with a computer screen, the pattern of this wallpaper cannot be changed by clicking on a menu point. The motifs are not optional; how they texture the surface of our living room is beyond our control. Some patterns are subtle and undemanding, almost camouflaged – the kind of décor that provides pleasant sensations. Other ornaments stick out, obtrusively garish, perhaps even embarrassing – or they might present themselves in comfortable brightness, not without pride.

This latter kind of rather opinionated memories are often related to a so-called ‘reminiscence bump’ of our ABM that mostly contains stuff from our late adolescence



Nebula, 2010

to early adulthood. Thus, events from that period figure quite prominently in our life-scripts: travel to previously unseen locales; beverage and cuisine not tasted before; movies watched for the first time; fragile romances that started as theatrically as they ended. Katharine Dowson's own reminiscences seem to get 'bumped up' whenever she thinks about her children's early years and how, when they matured into a world of grown-ups, it seemed right to give her children's toys away – to a charity, perhaps, or to other youngsters, who would still enjoy these 'age-appropriate' trinkets. Thus, there was ownership and then there were conscious attempts to let go of this privilege.

Against this context it is important to recognise that the formation of our concept of self is extremely sensitive to the surroundings we grow up in. These background noises feed back into how we experience and try to 'design' the childhood of our own children. Our upbringing affects how and what we remember – and, consequently, the perception of what it means to be 'me.' Often-cited is a cross-cultural difference that 'produces' two types of self: the independent versus the interdependent. As with all dichotomies, this polarity is stereotypical and can be misleading. Acknowledging that edges are blurry, it might nevertheless be helpful to explore this simple schema – if only to point out, that Katharine Dowson's art primarily reflects the independent type of upbringing. The dialectics of 'owning' and 'letting go' clearly depend on these notions.

Children that grow up in urban settings tend to develop more individualistic perspectives, as opposed to those from rural settings, who evolve more collectivistic orientations. It is the individualistic setting that encourages play with objects called 'toys' – as a mode to learn how to freely interact with the environment, and how to manipulate and control things. On the contrary, toys are virtually absent in many African and Asian villages and, if given to children by visitors, will more likely end up on a shelf as exotic 'totems.'

Moreover, people with an individualistic ABM recall more 'feelings' and specific



Never Letting Go (Green, Orange & Blue Bricks), 2010

unique events, whereas somebody who grew up in a collectivistic setting will recollect more group activities and interactions. The ABM of individualistic people will also reach further back into the earlier stages of one's childhood. To be able to trace oneself deep into the initial phases of existence means to own one's feelings and to be in control. As a consequence, Westerners are concerned with their 'emotional well-being.' They medicalise both their temperamental highs (*eg* 'attention deficit syndrome') and lows (*eg* 'depression'), prompting the current self-help epidemic.

Thus, an individualistic ABM fosters a 'totalitarian ego', with the self as a central entity. Interestingly, this approach is quite compatible with the zeitgeist of capitalism, an economic way of life that encourages not only 'private' ownership of objects but also an ABM that is a private possession.

Similarly, differences exist in how things are remembered between cultures where 'writing' leads to an emphasis on replication and recording, compared to ethnic groups that prioritise alternative cultural documentation, such as oral narratives or ritualistic performances. The latter are less concerned with the 'correct' recall of particular events – whereas an 'unbiased' documentation of the past is a Western obsession. Of course, it is at this fault line where Katharine Dowson's art transcends our normal 'Western' ways of remembering, as she infuses and embeds her memories with, and in, unusual substrates such as glass and acrylic.

Another important angle under which one might want to look at Katharine Dowson's 'relics' is the fact that our self can extend beyond the mere edges of our body, beyond the membrane of our skin. 'Objects' can thus become – quite literally – a part of us. For example, the sensation at our fingertips can slip into a brush with which we draw a picture or into the tool with which we craft a sculpture – or our sensation may merge with another body while 'making' love, or during a tango embrace.

How can such sensations be explained? Contemporary neurobiology demonstrates that the notion to be 'somebody' is a creation of the brain. This self-model



Never Letting Go (Yellow Duplo Blocks), 2010

is 'transparent' – because we are not aware of its existence. 'In reality', there is no kernel, no tangible area anywhere inside us, that contains the 'me' or my 'self'; nor is there a place and time in the universe that can be equated with a 'here' and 'now.' These individualistic experiences feel 'real', but are mental constructs. Of course, such illusions are useful, as they allow organisms to navigate through their environment with a sensation of coherence.

Our brain continues to run this programme of a coherent self, even if parts of the body are missing. This explains the phenomenon of 'phantom limbs' – the existence of physicality or pain felt by persons who have lost an arm or leg. Thus, our brain can allow us to 'experience' body parts that are no longer attached to us. It is the same programme in our brain that can also extend our phenotypical self, beyond the physical boundaries of our bodies.

In some societies, the self-model expands by integrating objects that one has given away. The donor's feelings remain 'with' the object, while it is out of sight of the original 'owner' and often far away, passed on from hand to hand. We remain connected with objects through their 'disappearance.' A notable example would be a ceremonial exchange system such as the Kula ring, which is at the very heart of the social identity in collectivistic societies of Melanesia. One could speculate that Katharine Dowson at times performs similar rituals through her art – expanding herself ('her self') in the process.

And so, when we marvel at her work, a new layer of memory will form – a memory of our memory of how somebody else's memory felt against our own memory ...

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Never Letting Go (Red Ferrari), 2010





Silent Stories, 2010, *installation view*



Silent Stories (detail), 2010, *front view*



Silent Stories (detail), 2010, *back view*



Silent Stories (detail), 2010



Silent Stories (detail), 2010



Vanitas 1, 2010, front view



Vanitas I, 2010, back view



Votives of Desire (Key), 2010



Votives of Desire (Doll's Head), 2010



Childhood Tales (Cavalry), 2010



Childhood Tales (Doll in Blue Spotty Dress), 2010

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Katharine Dowson behind Myriad, 2010

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