

SIBYLLE VON HALEM

essay on the exhibition "εὐχές" ("wishes") by Sibylle von Halem at the Monagri Foundation, Limassol District, Cyprus, in 1997

"Because of the need that has always driven men to imprint the traces of their activity on matter, nearly all phenomena of collective life are capable of expression in given objects. A collection of objects systematically acquired is thus a rich gathering of admissible evidence" Marcel Mauss, 1931, from *Instructions for Collectors* ("*Instructions sommaires pour les collecteurs d'objets ethnographiques*"), *Musee d'Ethnografie du Trocadero*.

In her own way Sibylle von Halem is a collector. Her admissible evidence, the fragmentary traces of a thousand lives. Here in the closing years of the twentieth century, where things fall apart into rootlessness and a myriad scattered traditions, what can we assert with confidence beyond the brief record of individual existence?

We catch these traces in her photographs of Cyprus's archaeological sites – an anonymous hand print in an ancient clay brick at Curium, the broken lettering of a mosaic inscription. Or in her delicate rubbings of the graffiti from the stone walls of the church at Monagri – just names and dates, grey whispers from the past.

Other images take the landscape of the human body, focussing minutely on the small blemishes, scars, and pressure marks as they are recorded on the artist's skin – another form of 'evidence' documenting our passage through life.

This is artistic archaeology, and elegiac unearthing of private histories, though with none of the archaeologist's scientific certainty. The difficulty of interpretation, the realisation that, however carefully the shards are put together, there are always other ways to arrange the pieces, is a strong underlying thread. Her black and white photographs veer dizzyingly from close ups to wide aerial views, yet are all the same size, blurring off at the edges so that they too become fragments, divorced from context, ambiguous and open-ended. Likewise her copies of graffiti, though systematically reproduced in the order they occur along the church walls, tell us nothing of the occasion that inspired the makers to etch their names. Any expectation of prescriptive 'truth' is punctured, and instead, we are invited to look, and to imagine, to fill in the gaps with our own emotions and stories.

A powerful series of wax sculptures extends the theme to include not just the imprints of man's physical presence, but the traces of his spiritual existence as well. Made from the melted down candles traditionally lit by worshippers at prayer, their very substance is saturated with secret hopes and wishes, lending them deep resonances. Votives, the wax replicas of a foot or other body part, left as offerings in church by those seeking divine solace from affliction, are the inspiration behind one group of these sculptures. Heavy wax tablets hang from the rafters, casting bat-shaped shadows; at the centre of each, an emergent form, which may be a mouth, a hand, a knee. In the dim light, the translucent. Moulded body-parts appear to be only partially

developed, as though trapped uneasily, in these prayer-full symbols, halfway between the reality of the flesh and the soul.

The tensions riddling body and spirit are also explored in the second group of sculptures. Thin sheets of candle-wax are strung together on copper wires, over shallow clay dishes, like samples in a science lab. Embalmed in each sheet, a scattering of wild roses. In some the petals have begun to open, whilst the rest remain tightly coiled buds.

Gathering rosebuds is, of course, an evocative metaphor for seizing the moment, and a reminder that all that is of the body will, in time, turn to dust. The metaphor is pushed further when we realise that the closed buds and curving stems of *Hearts and Flowers* suggest the outlines of sperm seen under a microscope, the genetic code-carriers and primary evidence of existence. Caught up in this aspic of wax, a distilled medium from countless prayers, they become an eloquent lament for the frailty of the flesh as the biological clock ticks on.

Like the votives, there is a subtle mix of beauty and brutality in these works. The fresh roses have been dipped in boiling wax to preserve them, an act of violence which adds a sharp edge to their soft blooms. Whilst in the clay dishes below them are the crushed bodies of insects, and a variety of little hearts: a chocolate heart, a stone heart, a chicken's heart – talismans for the many facets of love or desire.

This then, is the evidence for existence, a collection of traces laid out with reverent care, as if prized relics in a museum. Von Halem's vision may be a sombre one, which sees the spiritual bound up, inextricably, with the bodily clay; but there is a contemplative, intimate poetry behind her work which makes it much more than silent witness to thumb prints in the dust.

Jane Burton, June 1997, Monagri.