

‘Ravelling, Unravelling’
May 12th-28th 2009
Royal Institution of Great Britain

‘Trapped’

‘Thy rope of sands...’

George Herbert (1593-1633)

‘The line consists of an infinite number of points; the plane, of an infinite number of lines; the volume, of an infinite number of planes; the hypervolume, of an infinite number of volumes...’

Jorges Luis Borges, The Book of Sand

When thinking about Naheed Raza’s work I keep coming back to drawing, a discipline so familiar to us all yet always full of potential for new ways of doing and thinking. It is not so much the act of making a mark that I am thinking of though, but rather a complex relationship between eye, mind and material; one which involves being led, pulled into or out of – even, it seems, hypnotised or being held in a trance. What the viewer is looking at to some degree in these works, is the act of looking itself.

‘Mile of String’ presents us with the manifestation of forces on a material. It’s a complex compression of a single strand of a single material. The forces exerted, however they came about, have transformed this utilitarian, indispensable, hardware-shop item into a coral-like substance which could have grown over thousands of years; a complex model perhaps of some unnameable object, both familiar and alien, so detailed it seems impossible to map or imagine the process that brought it about. Is this the presentation of years of scientific research or a phenomenon that results in years of scientific research? There is also a consideration to be made here on what difference there might be between the ‘voluntary’ and the ‘involuntary’, what a material does ‘naturally’ under ‘unnatural’ circumstances. Exposed to certain conditions and forces most materials yield, and may be sculpted and shaped – but here the process feels unnatural. Like an embalming process, the technique employed seems to petrify, crystallising the soft, yielding subject into a taut, frozen matrix. The complexity of the shape is what draws us in, wanting to examine its depths and twists the eye is led into its convoluted landscape and becomes mesmerised, oscillating between the piece’s extremes. On the one hand there is too much for the eye to see and on the other, there is nothing there – just a pile of ordinary material in an impossible and useless tangle. ‘Mile of string’ feels like a trap in some ways, coiled, waiting for the unwary to fall into its chasms.

Another more literal trap is depicted in ‘Silk’. We are shown a domain, led around, witness to various scenes and aspects of some kind of lair, whose scale is difficult to decipher. There seems to be some kind of organic system in operation here, rotting, breeding, feeding, dying and decaying. Travelling across fragile surfaces and distances that feel sometimes immense, sometimes microscopic, the extent of this territory is vague. The blurring of my vision, created by thin planes of focus and the absence of obvious anchor points, extends this and engenders a sense of danger. Seduced by the pace and the curious movement of the camera, which is sporadic, mimicking the flies which

inhabit every frame, we advance further, insect-like, into this cloudy terrain. Flies, spiders and webs are everywhere and the camera at times follows along the incredibly delicate, hardly seen thread of silk left by the spiders – webs which seem to form an unconscious drawing in space. Using these physical connections between spaces to decide its own passage, the camera becomes a part of the ‘drama’, observing in a documentary fashion but also camouflaged by this method. There is a second ‘movement’ to the film where we experience a shift in mood and utter change in our relation to these creatures. A spider appears pinned to a surface and we watch as its astonishingly strong silk thread is drawn from its abdomen and wound onto a tiny spindle. The silk is being gathered for scientific research and has possible application in bioengineering as scaffolds for tissue grafting, but the reason for the harvest is never revealed in the film. A purpose to the process is simply assumed. All the same, the sight of this procedure taking place is extraordinary. The thread is now no longer part of a complex network, a mesh or membrane on which to ensnare prey but instead a line of glistening material, drawn out, finite. There is something macabre in this process, surely, reminiscent of a dark passage in a fairytale? But no, it’s just a precise piece of scientific research being undertaken. There is a switching here between truth and fiction, documentary and theatre, the viewer unable to settle on what is staged and what is simply routine. The atmosphere of the entire film is reminiscent of the surreal animations of the Brothers Quay – dark, ambiguous, alluding to a sense of ritual and magic.

The processes of winding and unwinding, spinning and gathering, weaving and drawing run through much of Raza’s work. Process and material become locked together and we become aware that essentially what we are looking at is behaviour, be that of a material or a creature, an organic growth process or its interruption. Something unravels or is unravelled before us and this is like the act of looking, the way the eye travels, focuses and absorbs. Our behaviour towards the external is being examined here, what links material and process, and perhaps mind and body too.

This concern with the body is explored further in a series of small casts that Raza has made of arterio-venous malformations, ‘unnatural’ structures appearing in the body; knots or tangles in an otherwise fluid system. Their complexity and labyrinthine structure recall ‘Mile of String’ with its tortuous trajectory. Raza’s casting of them solidifies and concentrates these organic nodes, ‘sites’ where disorder seems to rule. I’m brought back to think of Borges’ Book of Sand, the place where we started; the story of an infinite book whose pages grow out from the covers. Opened at any page and then closed again, it is impossible to find the same place twice. The book, like sand, is never-ending, unknowable.

Graham Gussin