

Philippa Lawrence, Oriel Davies exhibition

Essay by Sara Roberts

Philippa Lawrence smiles at an old friend. Her eyes have lit upon a tack, crudely hammered into the top of a picture rail to serve as the hook for cord from a Venetian blind, too high and too trivial for most people to notice. This is the kind of thing that delights her - the pragmatism, the utility and the beauty of such an object, the aesthetics of the everyday.

She has used tacks like this one in her installations - in such numbers and arrangements that life is breathed into them; they are animated by the fact of their community, by their implied society, its apparent hierarchy, by whatever force it is which draws them together. She has had them colonise the corner and surface of a broken table in *Swarm* (2004), and teem over the architraves within gallery spaces such as g39, Chapter and Oriel Mostyn (various installations, 2002-04). They follow their golden queen, one tack rendered in precious metal and thus elevated to leadership. Admittedly, at such a distance it is only a minority of onlookers whose patience and observation will be rewarded with a glimpse of this odd-one-out. But this is work of and for the observant eye. It is the artist's eye, which has recognised the insectoid in the humble carpet tack, and equated the blued sheen of annealing in its manufacture with the seductive yet repulsive iridescent shimmer of the bluebottle.

Flies have fascinated her since early childhood, spending long hours watching their flight patterns, beguiled by their dramatic cycles of consumption, sex, life and death. In her work, she has used actual flies on occasion: crawling in colonies over mirrors in a nod to the Vanitas tradition in *Untitled* (2005); encased within a lightbulb *A Light Death* (2002) or light fittings in *Help* (2003 and 2005) - so strongly attracted to the light source that they have become a part of it; and their fragile and evidently dead bodies gilded in *Glisten* (1998).

In her hands, multiple objects are animated through their apparent response to site: for example, in the site-specific work *Untitled* (2005) for the exhibition 'Anima' at B312 gallery in Montreal, seemingly innocuous handmade woollen pom-poms have acquired tribal habits as they colonise floor and recesses, responding to the building's previous function in the fur trade and to its idiosyncratic architectural features. Her choice of components is made with a wry understanding of human nature: the handmade pom-poms, which also make up *Soft Targets* (2006), are the benign products of solitary industry, a relic of childhood and of the low-craft make-do-and-mend era. People feel warmly towards them because they are amongst the first artefacts they ever made for themselves. They are fluffy and warm, and their juxtaposition into concentric circles, sometimes incidentally suggesting floral motifs, belies their final militaristic form - the wreath signalling the 'Soft Targets', or civilian casualties, of war.

Beginning the End (2005) is another colony, vibrant with potential for new life, but actually referring to a period of ill health, which led the artist to examine her genetic legacy. She has toyed with the idea of producing wallpaper using the images of its multiple glass forms, so that the viewer can become immersed in the wriggling mass.

In *Nothing is Something* (2006) she even makes a community of holes - exploring nothingness by collecting a multitude of holes and allowing them to coalesce. These are burn-holes in sheepskin parchment, carefully snipped around their fragile edge, and linked by tied monofilament to form an ethereal cloud. There is something repellent about the animal origin of the material, something too intimate for words, its treatment truly brutal; but the result is a thing of fragile beauty.

There is a particular kind of beauty in rendering ideas through constructed multiples, a formula with powerful appeal to the desire of the human eye to find order and repetition. Philippa's background in printmaking is just the beginning of her engagement with repeated acts, and the production of multiples comes naturally to her. Though she uses pattern in her work, she is resistant to the purely decorative, and while she is happy to adopt and adapt techniques from all manner of traditional making practices, not least from decorative conventions, she employs such crafts and skills solely to render her meanings more clearly, and not for their own sake.

She has written that her work demands "patience, discipline and rigour."¹ And says that it is possible to learn more about yourself through what you are prepared to do physically, whether it be operating a lumbering cherry picker to access tall trees or the winding and binding of a small pom-pom hundreds of times. Lawrence is naturally inquisitive and analytical, and wholeheartedly embraces specialist techniques and processes. She has mastered many of the skills required to achieve exactly the desired effect, believing the work gains certain tones and qualities through her actually making it rather than subcontracting fabrication.² (However, Philippa is happy to collaborate with specialists, such as silversmith Pamela Rawnsley, glassmakers in the Czech Republic or local neon fabricators). Wanting to understand the processes of gilding, and to form a connection with the master craftsmen of the past, she underwent training in order to use it with proficiency in *Glow* (1991). To create *Blood Pool* (2005), full of secrets, evidence, past crimes, a site-specific response to a door in House of Art, Ceske Budejovice, she studied glass fusion at the Creative Glass Guild in Bristol, before contracting the piece from local craftsmen. Employing the technique and material again in 'Without Light, No Hope' 2006. She took evening classes in scientific glassblowing at Westminster College in order to produce the multiple glass sperm forms in *Sperm* (1994) and used her training in photography to produce exquisite, technically accomplished photograms of them.

Repetition is a route to meditation, and many of the simple acts, which Philippa deploys, gain a contemplative, ritualistic power through repetition. The act of binding or bandaging a limb is transformed when it is applied to an entire dead tree, each branch tenderly wrapped, to protect, to conceal, or to render it more visible (*Bound*, 2003, National Botanic Gardens of Wales). Small repeated actions combine to achieve something physically big and conceptually bigger still. When this small-action-enshrined-in-a-larger-action of binding an entire tree is itself repeated, with trees sited in strategic spots in every county of Wales, *Bound* (2003-6). Ritual and meditation become a kind of public shamanism, where she is called to account for her action, and the action becomes a social as well as an aesthetic engagement.

More recent works, particularly those made for the International Site-ations Project 'Sense in Place' in Iceland, refer to more elemental themes in an environment of natural extremes. *Starburst* (2006) pictorialises harnessed forces; lightbulbs as symbols of electrical power, ordered and altered, gilded in white gold for everlasting radiance. But even as they are formally presented and captured in a repeated photograph, in reality they are beginning to tarnish and fade. *Fallen Star* (2006) has gilded lightbulbs emulating raindrops, in frozen freefall over porous, thirsty-looking lava rock.

In *Barcode* (2006), rendered on the schoolhouse on the island of Videy (just off the mainland of Reykjavik), the commodification of natural resources is spelled out in the act of wrapping a downpipe in cable ties, to emulate the pattern of barcodes on plastic mineral water bottles. Even the water we drink has a price and is controlled by inescapable market forces. Binding with cable ties is tighter, more forceful and aggressive than the bandaging of invalid trees: this work cannot be undone, unwound; it can only be destroyed.

Philippa Lawrence speaks of the impossibility of truly imposing oneself on the material world, and certainly hers is a gentle manipulation, an ironic and punning world-view. But while teasing out meaning from the trivial and the overlooked, and retaining a strong sense of playfulness, she yet deals with the big issues - life and death, sex and desire, love and loss. It is work, which is deeply relevant and connected with a true experience of the world, its issues and infinite complications.

Sara Roberts
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¹ *Like Gold Dust*, exhibition catalogue, Angel Row Gallery, 2002

² Interview, 4 July 2006.