SHADOWGRAPHS: THE TANTRIC RETABLOS OF TRUDE PARKINSON

What is as vulnerable, as evanescent as the human body? Ironic, isn’t it, that the vessel we depend on to bear our essence from our first to last breath also embodies our core concept of fragility and temporality. This is the flimsy structure we stumble around in, only too aware of every wound and every danger, perpetually anxious about things going awry outside or in.

The manifest pathos of the human body drives Trude Parkinson’s art, from the inside out. The figure appears constantly in her work, lost in seas of tone and material seeming at once to engulf and to enwrap, shrouding protectively and mortally. Especially in her latest two series, “Emanations” and Ghosts,” Parkinson muses on the body not by describing it in exacting anatomical detail but by rendering it a cipher, establishing it only in rudimentary, even approximate outline, negative space afloat in luminous mineral fields. But the generality of the image makes it more poignant, not less.

We associate with these empathetic, anonymous shadow-forms more readily than we would a portrait (a portrait, after all, is always of someone else – even when of you), a clothed figure (bedecked invariably in some other era’s fashion), or a nude (especially in art, the othered locus of the gaze). Our shadows are more alike than are our bodies themselves. Thus, for Parkinson, our shadows are the truest re-presentations of our common humanity, removed from race, size, often even gender.

Indeed, those are shadows hovering at the heart of Parkinson’s latter-day compositions. Other representations of the body predominated in previous series, but for the last several years, images of shadows – Parkinson’s own and others – have provided the artist with her leitmotif. Responding to the existential conundrum posed by the condition of the shadow – an entirely disembodied absence of light affirming the physical presence of a human being – Parkinson has considered the shadow from every epistemological vantage – intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, symbolic – relying on and often motivated by a broad array of extraneous sources, from modern literature to traditions of religious art, to help define her comprehension of the image. The conundrum remains: there is emptiness where the human is supposed to be. But a shadow, Parkinson has us understand, is a very full emptiness.

The shadows Parkinson captures in her “Emanations” and “Ghosts” are not reverse images of the bodies that cast them. That is, they are not simply human figures devoid of human features. They are foreshortened, skewed, often hobbled so that they gnarl into seemingly seated presences. They coalesce out of rich, oxidized swaths of metallic grain, often seemingly birthed by these glistening mineral seedbeds as much as cast upon them. The support structures themselves – small metal panels especially in the case of the “Ghosts,” somewhat larger metallic leaf in that of the “Emanations” – command a physical verity: they do not simply support pictorial information but become one with whatever has been laid on and in their surfaces. Their gross materiality, harsh and elegant at once, eroded and yet darkly sparkling, bespeaks both the precious and the worn. Parkinson here reifies the Japanese concept of *wabi no sabi*, finding beauty in the aged and poignancy in the corrupted.

Parkinson cites a wide range of artwork, visual and otherwise, as primary influences on her own. Buddhist philosophy, for instance bears on both the humanism of her work and its aspirations to transcendence – as does the interest she takes in Butoh, a modern dance form sourced in Japanese sensibility. Parkinson’s reliance on the shadow as the touchstone of her imagery derives in part from Carl Jung’s concept of the shadow as a figuring of those aspects (positive and negative) of the individual psyche which the psyche itself does not know – that is, the unacknowledged subconscious.

As images and as things – textured, nuanced fields that physically bear dark, distorted (non-) figures – Parkinson’s “Ghosts” and “Emanations,” even more than her earlier work, take on qualities of the votive. Her recourse to objects of contemplation and veneration manifests in the icon-like quality of both her centralized, minimalized compositions and the fine-tuned radiance of her materials. On the one hand, they conjure icons and retables, obliquely citing the ex votos of both the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Milagros tradition(s) of Latin America.

On the other they echo the “pure” form of the paintings made in the Indian subcontinent as triggers for tantric meditation. Is Parkinson’s androgynous shadow-figure a stand-in for the Madonna? The Buddha? A savior? Can these ghostly apparitions, these immanent un-bodies, be pictorial and abstract, there and not there, at once?

Both as images and as fabrications, the “Ghosts” and the “Emanations” occupy a mid-dimension between substance and immateriality. Their metallic qualities result from the incorporation of real metal, after all, and their humanoid shapes are clearly sourced in shadows – notably the recessional shadows that bend away from the vantage point as photographers attempt to capture them. But the more glistery Parkinson’s artworks get, the more nebulous become their visual fields. You’re supposed to be able to see yourself in a sheet of silver, but the silver leaf here, heavily oxidized and worked over with liver of sulfur, does not visibly acknowledge you, and in its volatility seems to contradict the reverse “you” embedded in it. And those works employing fabric, notably recycled kimono cloth and translucent silk, seem to carry their own human essence, as if they had been bandages for the wounded or shrouds for the dead – leaving little room for you, the living outsider. Your point of association is that dark, distorted body topped with a rudimentary head, a version of the human figure abject enough to insinuate itself almost sacrificially into the glowing grit of burnt metal and stained cloth.

With all their mute mystery and subtle mutability of their ingredients, Trude Parkinson’s “Ghosts” and “Emanations” beckon us toward them. They are as much jewel-like as soil-like, after all – and they have that configuration in the center that persists in referencing us. They are more lovely than they are fearsome. And they are more reassuring than they are ominous. They touch our sense of fragility and mortality, and do so in a way that embraces vulnerability – ashes to ashes, dust to dust. They remind us that we, too are made of stardust and precious metals, that water is as formidable as gold, and that some of who we are endures.

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