

## Objects of Narrative

Sybre Renema in conversation with Brian H. Murray

**Brian H. Murray:** Travel and exploration have been persistent themes in your work. How do you approach the challenge of rendering something so dynamic in a static art object? More specifically, what are the challenges of evoking the feelings of a journey within the enclosed space of the gallery?

**Sybre Renema:** I think that the appreciation of art on one side and the perception of travel on the other side are largely immaterial experiences. Both travel writing and art production convey an essence of experience that can only be reconstructed through the mediation of outside agents, such as diaries, sketches, stories and objects. This reconstruction is always quite imperfect, because it is further removed from the original subjective experience that prompted the object into existence. What results is a document, either a work of art or a travel diary, which is largely codified through previous objects that have undergone the same mediation. In other words, the code of past sculpture, for instance, dictates how future sculpture will be produced and perceived. In some cases, particularly where it concerns complex political or cultural mechanisms, it is easier to present these conventions themselves, rather than, say, the otherness of foreign travel. It is easier, and probably more worthwhile, to make art about the visual language that dictates how we look at Congo, than it is to make work about Congo itself.

**BHM:** So are you saying that the subject of your art is not so much travel but rather the history of the mediation of place?

**SR:** Yes. Where my work concerns travel, I am more interested in the historical conditions that gave us an almost Platonic idea of travel, rather than engaging in a fundamentally flawed attempt to present a 'unique' travel experience. Our understanding of travel and of geography has been largely codified by two agents: Romanticism and Empire. Romanticism is what has fixated our understanding of landscape around certain tropes, such as the sublime and the picturesque. Empire, on the other hand, has formulated our political views on otherness and how the world operates. By focusing very explicitly on these formulas, one can draw attention to the clichéd nature of these tropes. One then ends up working with the corpses of our cultural production, rather than with the naïve thought that these subjects are somehow fresh and untouched. Of course this method requires a large amount of archival work and reading – in the case of visual culture, you have to operate as an archivist.

**BHM: Your reference to archives here reminds me of another aspect of your work: your interest in collections, curios and relics. What do you get out of this mode of engaging with the past? And how do you approach a material relic differently, say, than a text written by a traveller or a poet? Is it a different kind of source?**

**SR: Books are very much material objects. I believe that a book worth reading is a book worth owning, which is why moving houses is such a messy activity for me. The ownership of a text requires more commitment than when it is kept on a digital platform. When a book exists on a physical level you are forced to coexist with it. I find the act of writing my name in the book to be a very powerful and worthwhile activity, particularly when it's an old book or one handed down to me by my family.**

**I also strongly believe that all objects contain ideology. Some objects contain ideology that I agree with, others contain ideology that I don't agree with, but which I find interesting nonetheless. Yet again, other objects don't hold anything for me. In my particular case, I collect books, signed jazz records, concert posters of concerts I played, fossils, art made by friends and objects created as Marxist or Catholic propaganda. Objects are very much activated by the narrative that surrounds them, which is often textual. The more you know about something, the more you will see when looking at an object. To you, a skull is a skull, but to a pathologist, there is a whole narrative there.**

**BHM: While we're on the subject of 'ideological objects', could you say a bit more about how your work deals with the ethical implications of empire and exploration? Obviously, you're partly critical in your treatment of the explorer as imperial hero. But what happens to the politics of race, violence, and oppression in your art?**

**SR: I think that these are very important issues, but they don't have to be at the surface to be addressed. The book I did with Timmy van Zoelen about David Livingstone, which is what you are particularly referring to, was critical of Livingstone by way of zooming in on an almost preposterously detailed element of his personal cultus, in our case wooden relics made from trees he had visited in Africa. The absurdity of that subject evokes an absurdity that permeates everything else about the subject, from his oppressive tendencies to the nature of religion.**

**BHM: There's a long history of theorizing the power of relics, but this is largely about the relic as devotional object – or as a channel for intercession. What is interesting or powerful to you about a leaf from a tree under which Dr. Livingstone died?**

**SR:** These objects are accumulators of narrative and when I find the narrative interesting, I find the object interesting. This doesn't mean I have to believe in the narrative, which is where I differ from those who are devoted to their relics. To me, it is more interesting that an object is imbued with narrative than that this narrative is true. The fact that, if we are to believe the Catholic Church, there are at least three skulls of the Virgin Mary is to me something that is to be applauded, because it helps people find a certain intimacy with the narrative they are trying to relate to. Objects are also a strong way of creating an identity. It is very nice, but very difficult, to believe in something and to me, objects are a very strong reminder of the narrative of things. Call it an act of vanity, but to me being surrounded by objects is a way of reminding myself who I am and who I want to be.

**BHM:** I know you engage in a lot of preparatory reading and research. Of course, unlike in academic or historical research, your scholarly labours are not necessarily evident in the finished pieces on display. What do you think your work gains from this approach? And, more specifically, what do you hope your audience gets out of it?

**SR:** Sometimes, an artist is informed by things that are seemingly invisible in their work, but this is only to be applauded, because it means that they have transformed the material into their own language. In an era of internet, with infinite access to knowledge and images, the artist first and foremost is a dung beetle, rolling his particular balls of dung from the images he likes. He presents balls of dung to the audience, invites them to lay their eggs in them, and it is from these that new dung beetles grow. The artist creates objects of myth – objects imbued with narrative. For an object to be believable, the artist needs to believe in it himself, so that when it is presented in the gallery, it operates on a similar level to all the other works of art that the artist presents. In this respect, art is a form of myth-science (to borrow a neologism by Sun Ra). It is important that this narrative object of myth communicates with other objects of myth, creating new cross-references. This is also why I like working in various mediums; it allows me to make broader references and thereby create bigger dichotomies between the disciplines I am interested in. This interview, for example, now includes references to both African history and space jazz.

**BHM:** So how do your art objects exist in relation to their textual sources? I'm thinking, for example, of your recent work on Coleridge and De Quincey. Are these artworks interpretations – or readings – of Romantic literature?

**SR:** I think they are essentially like self-portraits or at least borrowings of

what it is about these people that I find interesting and what it is that I would like to add to my own cultural persona. In the case of Coleridge, the notion of the wild man who collapses under his own myth is just very pleasing to me. It's not that different from the other historical figures that I am interested in, such as Livingstone or Shackleton. Coleridge, of course, was the intellectual giant of his time, but through addiction, weakness and maybe sloth seemed to have never created anything beyond a myth of his own grandeur. Yet when you engage with his myth, including the drug use, the failure and the frequent abandonment of his potential masterpieces, you find a particular coherence there. This coherence is perhaps more suitably appreciated through postmodernism, interested (as it is) in the fragmentary. Romanticism is equally fragmented, but a lot more formal and moralistic. A reading of Coleridge's writing as the literary equivalent to an architectural folly seems to me to be the fairest one. De Quincey, on the other hand, is much more easy to subjugate, used as we are now to a literature of addiction via Burroughs or Bukowski. The fact that he would quote Homer to his visions makes him a more interesting character than the average junky on the street, but again, the myths that De Quincey activates and engages with aren't all that unique. It is more the crossroads of these myths in the particular time, as well as his acute awareness that they were something that he could work with, which interests me.

**BHM: Finally, what kind of interventions can the artist make that the historian or the literary scholar cannot?**

**SR: I think an artist can be speculative to a much higher degree than a scholar can. Books about what would have happened to something or somebody are often quite tedious, but artistic reclamation of similar unsung subjects is often very interesting. By nudging something into a different medium, or by highlighting the weaknesses of the material in which the original narrative is set, the artist can show things that the scholar cannot.**

Dr Brian H. Murray is lecturer in nineteenth-century English literature at King's College London. His research explores the intersection of travel, empire, and religion in nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland. He has recently published articles on Dickens's travel writing, the literature of African exploration, and fantasies of the biblical past in nineteenth-century Ireland.