LOSS OF THE OBJECT

AND BONDAGE TO IT

'I like to write ghost stories and nothing fits a ghost better than a dying language. The more dead the language, the more alive are the ghosts. Ghosts love Yiddish, and as far as I know they all speak it [...] I am sure that millions of Yiddish-speaking ghosts will rise from their graves one day and their first question will be: "Is there any new book in Yiddish to read?"' Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1992 (quoted in Survivors and Exiles, Jan Schwarz 2015: 210)

I'm from South London. It's where I was born, grew up, continue to live and in February 2025 will have my first solo show as an artist- in the very same building where my mum had her studio some 25 years previously. There is another name for South London, one which I learnt on the terraces at Dulwich Hamlet: Transpontine. Over a bridge. I've been obsessed with this name ever since I first heard it, a name that could only make sense as a description of the place when viewing it from the outside. I find it really interesting that there's another important aspect of my identity which is also negatively defined in the sense that I'd describe my Jewishness as anti-Zionist. What links the two? I'm going to suggest it is alienation.

I am borrowing a definition of alienation from Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. When the young Marx wrote the *Manuscripts* he centred his critique of capitalism around the alienatory nature of work under it. This alienation was multifaceted: not only was the worker alienated from the product of their labour but also the the act of production itself, along with their fellow workers and a more abstract 'species-being' (Marx 1970: 106-115). The exact nature of this alienation is I think fascinating. It is not only a disconnect from but, in the process, a *tying to that which is lost*. Hence the phrase 'loss of the object and bondage to it', a direct quote from the *Manuscripts* and the title of both this show and two works in it.

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When I moved into my first studio in the summer of 2023, I didn't know what I would be making but I knew what material I would be using. For two years previous I had been working for a London based Brazilian artist, the first of three I have gone on to assist. A fairly significant chunk of this work consisted in making batches of a papier-mâché or paste of cardboard and wood glue to use as a strength giving under layer in his sculptures. I was fascinated by this material, with its production line recipe, its unpredictable shrinkage and darkening as it dried. I wanted to bring this paste to the surface.

There is a tension in my work that I think can be made sense of through the alienated nature of labour. As long as I have worked manual jobs I have felt deep lying insecurities, I guess you could call it a form of imposter syndrome, about doing this sort of labour. When it comes to making my own art this can explain a very purposeful 'botching'[1] of the under-layers of pieces. One form this takes is a repeated theme of closing gaps (often inherent in the base layer I work upon) in unconventional, haphazard ways. The application of paste may see these gaps disappear but the shrinking nature of the material allows these defects to return to haunt the piece.

[1] Botch is the right word for it due to its further archaic meaning as a swelling or tumour- reflecting a certain bulbousness also visible in my work.

At the same time as I employ a kind of 'active forgetting' (Derrida 2006: 143) of my inheritance, I also acknowledge and embrace it. I'm incredibly fortunate to have worked for the soundest, most encouraging and talented group of people. Not only the Brazilian trifecta but also the cabinet maker I worked for before them and the builder before him. The materiality of my work owes a significant debt to the latter two as well as the former. So not only do I use Oliveiraesque paste and a Borbanian blowtorch on occasion (look out for the occasional Tarsis matchstick too…) I also employ osmo oil and a colour palette of wood dyes that you'd associate with wooden furniture. Having started making art via the backdoor (I was an artists' assistant before I was ever an artist) I feel like I place particular importance on the act of production itself. The visible traces this production leaves behind I hope can inspire the kind of shudder you get reading Kafka when a real world location is mentioned (Kennedy 2016: 92).

As alluded to in the opening paragraph, the twin loss and bondage of alienation can apply to more than just labour. For reasons both obvious and ineffable I feel tied to South London. I equally feel a deep sense of loss about the place. The transformations of high streets like Lordship Lane. The disconnect I feel towards the newer residents. The total impossibility of being able to do anything other than rent (if even that) anywhere in the area I consider home. Where are the borders of my Transpontine? I find something irresistible in the *(un)heimlichkeit* (uncanniness) of places that exist within South London but outside of *my* south London. Orpington where (due to its relative affordability) my studio is based comes into this category as does Green Street Green- a place I have never been but the name of the first piece I ever produced.

About my alienation from my sense of Jewishness I could say so much. I am going to keep this section the briefest however[2] and simply link the spectrality inherent in postwar Yiddish (described above by Singer) to a spectrality inherent in alienation. I see the space that opens up in the act of alienation as one in which ghosts and the ghostly can thrive. South London also has a spectral underbelly, extending back to Blake, that can be seen bubbling up even when it seems at its blandest suburbanality such as in Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. My own personal experiences in Transpontine have on occasion echoed this uncanniness, like the discovery of an old buried well when doing gardening work for a client. There's a final connection I want to make. The otherness in, the otherness of, places like south London (or equally cultures like Yiddish) *can* lead to an acceptance, a welcoming, of otherness more broadly. A first step to challenge alienation, find its true causes and avoid getting stuck in merely negative solidarities.

Loss of the Object and Bondage To It features 25 pieces of art that I produced between July 2023 and December 2024 in my studio in Orpington. Interspersed among them are 3 poems I wrote in October and November 2021. This show is dedicated to my Grandma Pam Goodman and Granny Catherine Fleischmann who both died last summer.

Jack Brook, January 2025

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[2] This is something I explicitly want to explore in great depth in the future, building on ideas from my aborted Jewish Studies PhD application.

References

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