Sighing over ruins

Stephen Benwell's ceramics and paintings delineate an abbreviated Arcadia, which seems perpetually under threat of erasure. His pictorial world is inhabited by figures that are intimate in scale, often fragmentary and what could be called *low*falutin. Men disport themselves in mimicry of the Classical ideal, to poignant, poetic, humorous, camp, and occasionally desultory effect.

Benwell's figures may be non-canonical and highly idiosyncratic, but they amount, nevertheless, to a celebration of the nude. His conception of male beauty is as distinct from the proportional symmetry and taut muscularity of the Greek hero as it is from the Photoshopped angularity of the contemporary fashion model despite, on the one hand, his revival of Classical forms (the vase, the bust, the figurine), and, on the other, his practice of drawing from magazine photographs. His landscapes are, likewise, often incomplete or dimly perceived; sketches based on the paintings of the seventeenth-century French artists Claude Lorraine and Nicolas Poussin.

Brevity, mutability and poignancy: the whole effect is recognisably Arcadian, if by that term is meant the complex and often contradictory European visual tradition focussed on an idealised dream of life in the country. In post-Renaissance painting, for example, Arcadia, to be Arcadia, must be fleeting. Its pleasures are heightened, and made bittersweet, by the certain knowledge of their immanent loss. This is the point of the well-known group of paintings by the Italian Baroque artist Il Guercino and Poussin on the theme of 'Et in Arcadia Ego' – 'Even in Arcadia am I [Death].' Without mortality and change, Arcadia would soon become tedious or even devolve, as the ancient Greek sophist Philostratus put it, into an uncouth place populated with 'acorn-eating swine.' In other words, the experience of Arcadia requires a self-conscious attitude: we need to know that this idyll will soon be gone, or that this pleasure will be unique, or that this moment will never be repeated.

Benwell's nudes suggest a similar sentiment. Their self-consciousness derives from their resuscitation of familiar poses drawn from the repertoire of Classical art – some recline while others stand in *contrapposto*. The everyday is abruptly transmuted into the ideal, but incompletely and inadequately. There is no going back, as Benwell knows, but this is not an impediment to the appreciation of his figurines' unique, if awkward, appeal; an appeal that derives its affect from the disarming bathos of the attempt to emulate the Classical ideal in the present.

This bathetic quality – the juxtaposition of or sudden transition between high and low modes – is the central (productive) tension of Benwell's work. His revival of Classical forms and motifs may at first seem to resemble the postmodern artistic strategies of pastiche, bricolage or sampling, many of which exhibit little or no concern for the historical and/or cultural specificity of past styles. (All of history is collapsed into a perpetual present as Fredric Jameson once expressed it.) Yet given the erstwhile Arcadia that Benwell's works seek to reconstruct as well as, especially, his self-professed fascination with Hellenism, this does not seem quite right. As Benwell himself has said:

> It was the methods used by Hellenistic poets for reworking traditions that struck a familiar chord with my art practice. Was the post-classical Hellenistic age confronted by the same concerns as those of this current time, often called 'post-modernism'? The reference to 'epic' in the discourse of Hellenistic poetics has been interpreted as a concern over the way to respond to a received literary heritage for which the figure of the 'hero' was a central theme. The way out of this impasse may be the same now as it was then – to cultivate a 'bucolic' sensibility to that material.

For Benwell, the bucolic is a transhistorical discursive mode, which is not restricted to Antiquity, and does not necessarily imply the themes of rural or rustic life. It re-emerges at various times and places. In his view, one of the key characteristics of the bucolic literature of the Hellenistic period is the use of 'high,' that is to say, prestigious poetic genres (epic, for example), to express 'low' or mundane themes. This device clearly resonates with Benwell's own work in which ordinary figures from the present rehearse the canonical postures of the Classical past.

From this perspective, one way to characterise Benwell's aesthetic stance is to see him as 'sighing over ruins,' but in a spirit of genuine admiration and emulation rather than from a position of postmodern irony. His work is pervaded with nostalgia for the transience of ordinary, everyday beauty – nostalgia for the present and its inevitable loss *in* the present - which, he implies, is capable of obtaining the heady heights of Greek art. To borrow a phrase from the philosopher Arthur Danto, Benwell's work might be thought of as aiming for a 'transfiguration of the commonplace.'

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