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Chasing rainbows and forging swords
The work of Mildred Rambaud

Perhaps paradoxically, I suggest that *All the unsaid*, a large piece of black waxed paper, speaks most clearly of the oeuvre of Mildred Rambaud. The darkness of the piece recalls notions of abyss and nothingness, a glimpse of unknowable depths that we all carry within us but never fully comprehend. In this way, *All the unsaid* bears resemblance to the iconic 1915 painting *The Black Square* by Kazimir Malevich. It also acts as a kind of visual ‘last word’, in the same way that André Breton concluded the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto with the words ‘existence is elsewhere’. The work acknowledges that our existence, despite constant efforts to systematise, rationalise and organise, is ultimately mysterious, irrational and inexplicable. This is where the playful spirit of the artist becomes a serious voice, for artists too create visual ‘languages’ constructed to engage with the big existential questions such as: *Who Am I? Where Do I Come From?* and *Where Am I Going?* However, artists like Rambaud tend to do so in the knowledge that there are no answers to be found. They are assured rather than haunted by the fact that futility and transience are inherent aspects of life.

Indeed, it is as though Rambaud has become friends with futility and transience, as though for her, the darkness of *All the unsaid* is warm and safe, simply part of the light, like night together with day, or the moon working in unison with the sun. The long run of black waxy material suggests a protective purpose, as though the large sheet could be used as a survival blanket designed to save us from a storm. Indeed could we say that art works in general are made to provide shelter for artists, protection from their own intensity of emotion? As a state of being associated commonly with sadness, but also with the experience of profound connectively committed to events and relationships of the past, melancholy infuses the many recurring motifs in the work of Rambaud. In *Hailuto*, the photographic still of a video film performance in which the artist constructs her own sledge that will not slide on a small island in Finland, Rambaud adopts the well-known pose of a lone, deeply reflective, ‘melancholy’ wanderer. The figure gazes longingly at the horizon as she becomes almost indistinguishable from the bleak, cold, and inert landscape that surrounds her. Thinking in parallel with the Finnish photographer, Elina Brotherus, who made the 2003 series *Der Wanderer*, Rambaud places herself in the same position as Casper David Friedrich in his iconic ‘melancholic’ painting, *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* of 1818. By depicting her own female body as the isolated, thoughtful explorer, Rambaud, like Brotherus, inserts herself, and women in general, into the discourse of melancholy.

Sharing a similar tone with Albrecht Dürer’s 1514 earth bound angel in the engraving *Melencolia I*, *Untitled (Two Trees and a Kite)* from 2008 by Rambaud considers another ‘melancholy’ notion: the experience of failed flight. Furthermore, it is the frustrated attempt to fly that opens up a telling comparison between the work of Mildred Rambaud and that of Francesca Woodman. In the same way that Rambaud employs Butoh dance in many of her performances and is thus seen only in part and in flux in the still photographs that document such performances, Woodman also is typically looked upon as hidden, absent, or fleeing from her own picture frame. Similar to the work by Rambaud, in which she makes a kite that cannot fly, Woodman makes angel wings that will not take-off. As Rambaud is destined to remain grounded with two

trees, Woodman too is clearly bound to the earth as she takes a big jump painfully bound by gravity next to the large pair of hanging wings. Both artists demonstrate an alchemist's desire to overcome dualities, to unite the divine and human, the spiritual and the bodily, while at the same time revealing their limitations in attempting to merge these disparate elements. Both Rambaud and Woodman also share a preoccupation with circular discs and with the movement of such to shield and cover the artist self. In the 2010 performance, *Snowflakes on Mars*, Rambaud dances with a large, circular, steel disc, dulled and lunar on one side and polished and solar on the other. Woodman made *Yet Another Laden Sky* in 1977-78, a photograph in which she conceals her face with a small circular mirror. Preoccupied with interior investigation, both Rambaud and Francesca Woodman hold spherical objects to obscure their faces and demonstrate that a body concealed, or shown in part, can reveal more of a complete psychological state of existence.

Indeed, Rambaud is not present at all in many of her works, but to think of these pieces as essentially abstract and without the presence of a body, would be a mistake. Although on first glance *Don Quixote* appears to be a photograph of an empty bridge, there are many bodily associations to be made. The bridge could become a metaphor for the umbilical cord, a reference to the short period of attachment, which we all miss and long for once severed. To build a bridge is ultimately a connective gesture, a desire to make links and to live joined to others and to other things. In this case, there is a desire to connect a man-made house to nature-made tree; a sense of craving for an earlier and more organic state of being can be detected in this work. Furthermore, the motif of the bridge was used by the German Expressionists to denote their group, *Die Brücke*, a collective of artists dedicated to a moving away from stale tradition and towards a more dynamic and 'expressive' kind of art practice. Interestingly, it is a bridge that Edvard Munch's figure stands on in the well-known 1893 painting, *The Scream*. Thus, although we feel a sense of balance and newly sought connectivity when looking upon Rambaud's *Don Quixote*, something unstable and shaky also creeps into the picture, perhaps the ghost of Munch, or the echo of his scream.

Equally, although viewed as abstract objects — titled using classical Roman numerals — Rambaud's highly coloured steel discs contain ghosts, as well as flesh and blood. Painted as coiled, oscillating circles, which vibrate outwards on viewing, the discs transform before one's eyes into multi-coloured, three-dimensional shells. As a shell has long associations with birth stemming from *The Birth of Venus* painted by Botticelli in 1486, the discs echo as womb-like spaces, the site from which we all emerge. Considering the womb as a protective space, the discs also become shields. As suggested by the 2010 work, *Untitled (Portrait and Spear)*, these are the shields designated for the great warrior women of history. Portrait is in fact an obscured image of Joan of Arc, who is also discovered in part on a 'tower' sculpture titled *Reliquie*, and serves as continued source of inspiration for the artist Rambaud. As the shields and spears are highly decorated for battle, the joy of life is integrated with the ominous onset of death. The end is recognised as never far from beginning, and as is typical for Rambaud, playful colour diffuses confrontational considerations of darkness.

The circular disc, along with the spiral and the tower, are recurring motifs for Rambaud. Interestingly, these are also recurring motifs for artist Louise Bourgeois. While Rambaud cuts small towers with stepped edges from pieces of lead, and paints coloured spirals onto large steel discs, Bourgeois cast *Spiral Woman* in bronze in 1984 and constructed three steel towers in the Tate Turbine Hall in the year 2000. Bourgeois has said that to depict the spiral is her attempt to control chaos and, to live at the centre rather than the periphery of life.^[1] Similarly, Rambaud's spirals and towers ask the question that she herself has said is one of life's most important: "Where are we going?"^[2] In tarot, the tower card represents the Hindu Goddess of Death, Kali. Kali is known to shatter structure and stands for the end of patriarchy.^[3] In much the same way, Bourgeois and Rambaud decide to slay that which stands in the way of what is real, and to destroy falsity. Interestingly, Rambaud often uses lead to make her small towers, and in the system of alchemy lead is the metal connected to Saturn, the planet associated with melancholy. There is a definite sense of transformative power in the work of Rambaud, as though like the alchemist, she works with base metals in the hope that they will soon turn to gold. Equally, perhaps she works with shapes and geometry because of an otherworldly aspect, for geometry is not only concerned with the measuring of the earth, but also, with the investigation of the positions of planets and stars. As both melancholic and alchemist, Rambaud always appears to be addressing a balance of some sort, as though she carries an understanding that it is through the union of opposites, such as battle and protection, the tower and the spiral, and man and woman, that we move closer towards equilibrium. Could it be said that certain artists today, those concerned in particular with the depths, joys and pains of the human condition, have become magicians or shamans, those who recognise a spirit world and make manifest such intangible visions through art?

At the same time as possessing a sense of the otherworldly, there is also a strongly rooted quality of the everyday, of repetitious tasks and the realities of making in the work of Rambaud. The artist speaks of how she uses a standard clothes iron to melt wax; she therefore produces epic paper sculptures to be viewed by large audiences following a subverted version of a lowly and domestic female task. Indeed, it is not inappropriate to mention feminism in relation to the work of Rambaud. During the 1970s, feminist artists experimented with ancient motifs rooted in female sexuality, most notably Carolee Schneemann did so with *Interior Scroll* of 1975, in which during a performance the artist unravels a paper scroll coiled inside her vagina, and reads the words that she has written as they emerge. Rambaud too, displays an interest in archetypal female strength, and the performance piece *Porte Papier Ciré (To carry waxed paper)*, 2008, makes for an interesting comparison to *Interior Scroll*. In *Porte Papier Ciré*, Rambaud dances with a lengthy and heavy concertina of paper until the performance reaches a climatic end when the artist does the splits and the folded paper unfolds from her vagina. Interestingly, Francesca Woodman also made a photograph in which she emerges from a sheet of waxed paper holding a shell. This work provides the same glimpse of an entry point to a womb-like world that also re-recalls the luminous and trembling disc pieces by Rambaud already considered. Similarly,

the 2008/2011 performance *Pot*, is a very visceral performance concerned with the life of a woman. In *Pot*, Rambaud is the water carrier also seen in many neo-classical nineteenth century paintings, and most notably in *La Source*, painted in 1856 by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres. However, Rambaud is not depicted as an idyllic languid beauty created only for male fantasy and titillation. Instead, she is both author and character of/in the work — as model she is far from passive, as she not only constructs her own ceramic pot but then proceeds to work to fill it with water, and then to despair as the water leaks and the pot disintegrates. The performance seems to be a profound meditation on the efforts made, and losses experienced by all women. This said however, Rambaud engages with a level of subtlety, which unlike 1970's feminism does not force a feminist view of her work. She does not alienate male spectators, for of course her practice speaks of the futility and transience of human beings, as much as it does the female condition.

Making suggestive references to art works of the past, as well as to ancient figure-heads, Rambaud also literally re-uses materials from old pieces to form new ones. For this reason she uses wax, easily melted down while at the same time the residue of the material's previous existence never quite leaves it. In a similar way, although Rambaud need not fight like Joan of Arc, she does not scream like the Expressionists, and nor does she channel anger into her artwork like some Feminists, she does, however, respectfully re-cycle all of these people and times gone by into her own contemporary practice. As an artist, she cleverly, quietly, and with bold confidence carries all that is old, collective and shared into a new, individual and uniquely authored visual story.

[1] *Louise Bourgeois, Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father, Writings and Interviews* (Violette Editions: London, 1998), p.222/223

[2] *Interview of Charlotte Lindsay and Mildred Rambaud by Rebecca Baillie, 25th of May 2011*

[3] *Vikki Noble, Motherpeace: A way to the goddess through myth art and tarot* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), p.118