

One thousand years from now

In Berlin, on a top floor of the Altes Museum, is kept an engraving of rare beauty. It depicts a couple in bed, laying with their arms and legs parallel to each other, dressed in colourful garments under the afternoon trees. The woman has her eyes closed, in deep sleep, and a vague and peaceful smile. The man has no head, which lies on the floor next to the bed, the eyes closed and the face depicted in dark grey. Next to them, two men stare at the head while holding their swords upright, as if prepared to leave after accomplishing the murder that brought them there. The whole scene is enveloped in such peace, such calm light bathing the woman's smiling face, that one cannot avoid a deep feeling of tranquillity – the tranquillity she displays in her body, in her face, in her smile. Hers is a sleep before the fall, before the realisation of disaster, before the painful wakening. She is the inhabitant of a threshold beyond which turmoil prevails – and the world inclines into chaos.

Such threshold, such frontier swollen to the point of becoming a land one can reclaim and inhabit, seems to me a privileged birthplace for many of David Murphy's pieces. Bathed by a fading sun they hold fast to the ground, erecting dikes and dams, signalling danger, bridging gaps and closing breaches. Here in this land structures are held precariously in place, others suggest a perpetual movement of resistance, always haunted by erosion and rising water levels. I have, in the past, seen hope in them, resilience beyond achievement and today – moreover – it is the continued occupation of such a place that triggers my imagination and a sense of my own contingent presence in the world. It could well be that this threshold is all we are allowed to live, forever verging on disaster and dissolution while keeping them away with our repeated shanties, our walls erected before the tempest. 'To be contemporary is to create its own time and not only reflect it. Reflect yes, but not as a mirror, rather as a shield. To be contemporary is to create its own time, that is, to fight against nine tenths of that time, as one fights against nine tenths of the first draft'.¹

Writing, drawing, sculpting – these could be our provisional defences, the echoes of our voice heard deep throughout the night. The words of Tsvietaieva, the structures David erects, the traps and the tools scattered across his land – will remind the future that confidence was kept amidst the heavy fog. They are those who resisted, who will remain – and those whose past has yet to come. For to defend a frontier line is also a way to defy time; a way to endlessly

¹ Marina Tsvietaieva, 'The poet and Time', 1932; translated from 'O Poeta e o Tempo', p. 73, Ed. Hiena, 1993

push ahead the brink of the past made future, which we call present. To defend a frontier line is a way to defer time, to perform an act of suspension whereby past and future mingle and become two faces of a revolving coin. Hence, perhaps, the feeling I have that David's sculptures arise from a past yet to come, or conversely from a future long gone by. If time were a sea, they would be the wreckage found at its shore.

Maybe the steady flow of time will in the end level all that was lived, transforming all memories in one single memory, one single sentence replacing the whole of History, the whole of mankind. If it were so, I imagine these sculptures would be comfortable with their own disappearance, condensed in one single point in time. Their dormant potency is as effective as it is discrete, as if their function was to present nothing more than their own traces. By doing so, these sculptures find a delicate and almost elusive resilience, a gentle way of deferring disaster while courting the erosion of time. If rivers are the writers of landscape, erosion handwrites notes on its margins – and notes are what remain, out of the debris of History. In this land, erosion becomes a synonym for sculpture.

Pedro Faria, December 2010

Written to accompany David Murphy's exhibition 'Almost Island', held from 14 January until 11 February 2011 at CoExist Galleries, Southend-on-Sea