

■ Trisha Donnelly

Modern Art Oxford October 6 to December 16

■ Jaki Irvine

Chisenhale Gallery London October 31 to December 9

Made up of fragmentary images and unassuming objects, Trisha Donnelly's show at Modern Art Oxford leaves the rooms looking almost bare and consistently frustrates the viewer's efforts to uncover a narrative thread or metaphorical programme. What the San Francisco-based artist offers instead is a kind of muffled mood music, an offbeat lyricism that courses almost imperceptibly through the show.

As the main stairwell has been shut off, visitors enter the exhibition by the smaller staircase that leads directly into the largest room, which in most shows at the gallery serves as the climactic final space. This alternative route has the viewer feeling like an interloper, a feeling that is then strengthened by the show's provisional air. A large black cloth-covered structure hangs from the ceiling, looking a little like a gallows, or a giant walking stick or tap or, more appropriately, a question mark. (Behind it is a window from which another window, set in a black wall, is clearly visible; Donnelly's structure may be an echo of that black-fringed opening across the street.) On the far side of the room, a cluster of fir branches spills over a balcony just above the doorway that leads – backwards, as it were – into the next room, while jazz music plays in the background, its suave and dated cheer at odds with the sparseness of the installation.

Entering the next room, the visitor is faced with a rectangular block of mahogany which, standing on a slender steel upright, faintly resembles a commercial sign or bulletin board but carries no intelligible information, only a small formless hollow crudely gouged out with a knife. Wilting roses sit in small vases to either side of the block while another stack of fir branches lies half-hidden at the end of a makeshift corridor and a painting on velour graces the wall, carrying a shadow-like shape on its lime-coloured surface. The jazz wafting in from next door is overlaid with the sound of a wind chime that hangs outside by one of the windows. And the last room features intricate drawings of unidentifiable natural forms, some carrying mysterious acronyms, and photos of small strips of worn fabric.

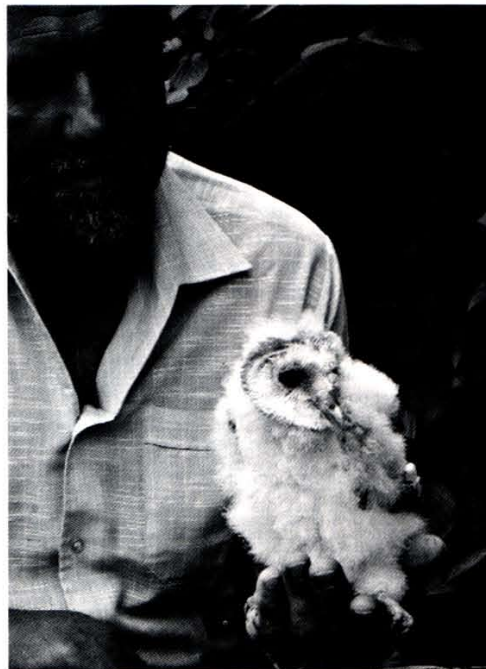
The show is animated throughout by a sense of drift, by the bittersweet pulse of missed occasions and crossed wires. It conjures an impression of disorientation that is of course compounded by the back-to-frontness of the visitor's trajectory through the gallery. Donnelly leaves you feeling vaguely jet-lagged or sedated, lost in a world of rich sensory impressions – the smell of fir, the textured surfaces and strains of music – and semiotic blind alleys.

This seductive but mannered show would be stronger if it did not flag up its own mysteriousness as insistently as it does. Some of the motifs here, such as the acronyms in the drawings and the scraps of material in the photos, come across not as illegible signs but as signs of illegibility. Nietzsche once wrote, 'It is my favourite wickedness and art that my silence has learnt not to betray itself by silence.' Would that Donnelly followed the same principle.

For those who feel that the coyness of Donnelly's show is overdone, Jaki Irvine's multi-screen video installation at the Chisenhale Gallery offers sturdier fare. The show, a product of her work at the Irish Raptor Research Centre, follows

Trisha Donnelly
installation view 2007

Jaki Irvine
In a World Like This 2006
video still



birds of prey, many of them recovering from injuries, as they sit on posts, perch on their handlers' arms and fly short distances. The material is immediately absorbing. Here an eagle flies towards the camera, its fish-like body suspended between oversized wings; there a vulture tries to reach its handler, its wings making violent thudding sounds until it

manages to lift itself off the ground. One eagle sharpens its beak on its perch while another twitches, its head bobbing and ducking as it catches scents on the breeze. In a comic exchange, a bald eagle, its heavy brows and hooked beak giving it an officious look, seems to commune with its handler, their heads turning in time as they look one way and then the other.

What initially compels the viewer's attention, driving both the unsettling and the comic moments, is the knowledge that these birds, for all their sleekness and power, are in captivity. In one of the show's more unnerving scenes, seven birds sit tethered to perches on a lawn, looking like oddly hieratic garden ornaments, while a pair of turkeys wander gormlessly among them. In another passage on the same screen, a raptor pecks at the bell and the leather jesses that are attached to its feet. This is, you suspect, a routine that is rehearsed over and over again.

If the birds grab your attention, the artist holds it. The camerawork is sure-footed and the positioning of the screens is neatly managed; together they heighten the viewer's alertness to the alternating periods of confinement and release at the sanctuary. Four screens, forming a loose cube in the centre of the gallery, show birds exercising, flying to and from their handlers. Occasionally, a panning shot of a bird in flight starts on one screen and finishes on another so that viewers have to move sharply to catch the bird's trajectory in full, turning their heads as quickly as the owls that also feature in the show. On the screens to either side of this central area are quieter passages, the birds appearing in repose. So the artist elicits a measure of bodily empathy in the viewer as she describes the shifting cadences of the birds' existence.

If you spend long enough in the gallery, those cadences start to take on a peculiar rightness. The pacing of the editing is so responsive to the movements of the birds and routines of the sanctuary that it gives the show as a whole a raptor-like sharpness and stateliness. This has one unexpected effect: it inflects our understanding of the birds' captivity, which comes to seem natural, the measured rhythms and assured organisation of the video installation transforming their confinement into a simple given.

This is a show that serves up a startlingly intimate vision of an unfamiliar world and in the process enjoins in its audience a complicity that is by turns heady and disturbing. ■

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