

***Unearthing Beauty* by Andreas Levantis**

Joel Tomlin's work persistently speaks to us from and about the distant past.

The artist's earlier paintings 2005-2006 were typically made on unprimed linen, with a paint application so delicate and tentative that the support's texture is always apparent. The results are ethereal tableaux that resemble beautifully faded tapestries in which the artist's protagonists have often all but vanished. Pastoral genre painters such as Claude and Poussin, were an influence at this time, and Tomlin similarly enjoyed conjuring rustic Arcadian worlds.

In paintings and works on paper from the last few years however, Tomlin has done away with any implied narrative and concentrated instead on honing a reduced symbolic language, which owes more to Picasso's Vallauris ceramics from the 1950s than the 17th Century. In a process of distillation, only the artifacts from Tomlin's ambiguous stories remain; be they animal, plant, or surrogate human forms.

It is perhaps natural, given his previously painted allusions to Paganism that Tomlin's output has become increasingly evocative of tribal art, especially since the artist began focusing on producing and showing three-dimensional objects. These are pieces that for the most part can be held in the hand, indeed they beg to be handled, and it is easy to imagine them having once functioned as talisman or charms for warding off evil spirits.

Joel Tomlin's latest body of work is dominated by sculptures comprised of assembled elements, several of which are cast in bronze, thereby adding to their archaeological character. The artist has worked first as a Blacksmith and then in a foundry for a number of years and so has long had an affinity with and facility for the metal. Wood, tin, copper, and gesso are also deftly employed in various ways, and all these materials convey equally a sense of malleability and the lingering warmth of touch.

The small painted bronze 'Pistol' (2013) could have been unearthed from an ancient burial site. Careworn and intimate in scale it might have been a fortunate child's toy. Covered in chipped cream tempera and decorated with pale red, green, and gold highlights the object looks to be crafted from a material other than metal, perhaps bone or clay inlaid with stones. The weapon's profile, by way of an Arcimboldo-esque metamorphosis, becomes that of a faun's face, with the trigger providing the tilted lower lip of a bewildered mouth, and the barrel a comic snout. Surrealist in spirit and temperament, it would not have been out of place sitting on Andre Breton's writing desk.

One of Tomlin's largest scaled recent works, 'Black Altar' (2012), is a low, floor-based stack. The first section is bronze, but mimics a worn stone plinth. The next level, a female lower torso with discreet carrying lugs on each side, is again bronze but this time finished, with a distinct Henry Moore patina, to look like it is so. The piece culminates in a single gesso painted bronze fig – a lone votive offering - placed off-centre on a rectangular wood block. Even more than the other works describes, this piece appears to be in some way explicitly functional reliquary, as if it might serve a purpose in a ritual.

Similar to the manner by which Joseph Beuys co-opted fat as a storehouse or battery for kind of nourishing energy, so Tomlin's bronze figs are akin to powerful mobile transistors that allow for a continued dialogue with the past. The artist explains how this symbol is '...capable of containing a legend... figs being in a way the connective tissue between the shepherds of Arcadia, Greek drama, and the familiarity of the greengrocers display.'

On more than one occasion the artist has used upended tins as pedestals, which although painted with a thin white wash, are nevertheless very obviously found objects. Like Beuys, and as outlined in the tenants of Arte Povera, which the German artist adopted, Tomlin sees any hierarchies between art materials and common things as irrelevant and limiting. He applies the same leveling device to his eclectic visual language. The ambiguity and mutability of both material and form as evident in Tomlin's oeuvre engenders great potential for imaginative projection on the part of the viewer. Unsure of whether we are experiencing ideas at the beginning, middle or end of processes of reification is testimony to a practice rich in creativity possibilities.