

One

Writing

“A certain art of reading – and not merely the reading of a text, but what is called ‘reading’ a picture or a town – might consist of reading askance, of casting an oblique look at the text. (But this no longer has to do with reading at the physiological level: how could we teach our extra-ocular muscles to ‘read differently?’)”

Georges Perec (1936–82); ‘Reading: A Socio-physiological Outline; 1: *The Body*’ (1976)

Fiona Banner’s art is concerned with processes of looking, seeing, craft and documentation. In the past, she has made highly detailed descriptive transcriptions of the “action” in pornographic films and in iconic war films such as ‘Apocalypse Now’ (1979) and ‘Full Metal Jacket’ (1987) in ‘THE NAM’ (1997). Her interest in sculpture, and in particular the form and materiality of fighter-aircraft design, is also an intrinsic strand of her art-making. This array of media – sculpture, performance, film, drawing and painting – have as their common denominator in Banner’s art a founding exploration of text.

For Banner, text is both semiotic and sculptural; it is a means of communication and a malleable medium. The composition of sentences – and the writing of those sentences as blocks, shapes, statements and narratives of varying sizes – is co-joined in her practice with the ways in which these texts may be displayed, installed and, subsequently, read. To experience Banner’s art is thus to engage at a visceral, disarmed level with the basic processes of looking and seeing. Within these processes, “reading” is a sub-strand of activity, yet exists with parity to the broader issues of observation and scrutiny. In one sense, Banner presents the viewer with a philosophical endeavour: to correlate the relationships between looking and seeing, and between sign and meaning. That which was reflexive becomes conscious; the function of text becomes that of volume, but skewed, and alive with authorial tension.

So, what do you get?

At first glance, it is the density of lettering that holds the viewer’s attention. Reflexively, the eye searches for a place on which to rest its gaze – only to find the process of looking to be somehow bounced by the object of its scrutiny. The anxious gaze slips hurriedly around the compass points of the textual mass before it, alighting on single words or phrases. It is as though to configure sense, let alone meaning, from these intent calligraphic lines, viewers must allow their reading to become de-accelerated. The alternative course of action – as looking attempts to become seeing – is for viewers to allow their gaze to crash.

Once tethered to the words before it, the eye acknowledges their crude but pleasingly neat tabulation. Line widths are roughly uniform, yet the temper of the text appears urgent, and at times even frantic. The printed handwriting seems to articulate a tension between obsessive compulsion and the demands of mimetic function. The lines of writing create monumental blocks of words, with lowering shade occurring at those points where the letters become cramped and miniaturised. There is a formal satisfaction in the contemplation of the shapes these words generate. The sensation is that of observing containment; the experience is almost tactile. At the same time, the viewer’s empathetic powers are invoked by the narrative of creativity (leaving aside that of authorship, for the time being) that this work, as a spectacle, implies. The words appear freed of anything but their own identity; they disown their writer, even as they exist as the residue of a particular period of time. They are inscrutable – not in their meaning, but in their purpose.

In this, Banner's concerns are as ancient as anything in the history of mark-making. They relate to calligraphic imagism (such as the pictorial power of Eastern alphabets and ancient letter systems), and to successive moments within the history of language, as much as they pertain to art. In their turn, these concerns possess an inescapable yet almost accidental literary significance. Her art is at once in tune with the coolness and brutality of an age of mass mediation, and related in form and intention to a lineage of literary experimentation. Summarised, Banner transcribes the object of her looking in written form: that which was visual become verbal. As all art is a process of translation, so for Banner the process of translation is lateral as opposed to hierarchical: what happens when that which is seen is documented as that which can be read? Firstly, the reader becomes a viewer; but then an oscillation of roles occurs in which text shuttles between object and transcript. The art work both describes and commemorates a process of resolution. The act of transcription becomes both subject and media – but, of course, it doesn't end there.

Two

Reading

In Banner's project, 'Performance Nude', we follow a line of words at random: "up and down in the middle skin stretch tight all around"; and another: "feet for flat on the ground shadow arching up in the middle vein throbbing"; and yet another: "beside her ruddy knees knotted with tension and her feet puce, limpited to the...".

The literary effect of these sentences can be likened to that of a stream of consciousness: detail becomes associative, pursuing its own flow through a prose style that owes more to cumulative effect than to conjunction. However, the concentration upon a precise, mimetic charting of her subject – be that a film or a life model – routes Banner's use of language away from a specifically literary purpose. Rather, she employs text and language as a visual medium, in which the reading of words runs parallel to their visual and conceptual function within the work.

In 'Performance Nude' (2007), Banner creates textual portraits of her subject in a manner resembling, in part, the processes that would be employed within a traditional figurative drawing of the same life model. As the viewer experiences Banner's written engagement with the figure – most particularly the processes of close observation – one becomes aware of her creative decisions in making the work. She must ceaselessly refer to the model, checking and adjusting her artistic response, and making necessary adjustments to the direction and nuance of her line of thinking. (Just as, for a draughtsperson, it is necessary to maintain and direct the relationship between looking and drawing.)

As can be seen from the resulting works, Banner creates verbal description in a prose style that is both forensic in its pursuit of accuracy, yet open to poetic nuance and adjectival colour. Unlike a literary use of language, however, Banner is not attempting to create an authorial style: her intention seems more to create a verbal shadow (or "negative" image) of her subject. Sudden flows into literary effect are, for the most part, accidental, and seem to occur beneath the surface of the text.