

LOTUS: Myth, Ritual and Non Knowledge

The lotus flower blossoms from shallow waters. Its roots embed into the muddy bottom of a pond, whilst its stem grows up towards the light and upon breaking the surface of the water is crowned by petals. Typically pale, pristine and perfectly uniform in structure, the flower sits in stark contrast to the dank waters from whence it came - appearing to have been placed by some outside hand, or else manifested by magic. It marks the passing of time, responding to the celestial rhythms of the earth orbiting the sun; by day its petals unfurl and open, and as the sun sets and night falls, they close.

The flower has lent its name to the group exhibition *Lotus*, which brings together seven contemporary women artists who use the occult as a strategy to question temporality and non-knowledge. Mining ritual and myth, foresight and futurology, they deploy divination, tarot, folkloric figures, alchemy and spirituality as tactical tools in order to carve a space outside of linear time, patriarchal modes and totalitarianism. In disrupting temporal and epistemological positions a space is generated for another perspective where alternative subjectivities and female narratives can be envisioned. Here the mystical is used for political means.

The curious biological and physical properties of the lotus have engendered a plethora of mythologies and symbologies across continents and cultures.¹ Native to (near) Asia, the circadian rhythms of the flower led to it being adopted as a symbol of infinite rebirth and a vehicle for divine creation in ancient Egyptian, Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies - with Gods, Goddesses and universes all blossoming from its bud. Within these traditions it has accumulated a continuum of symbolic references, consistently signifying the uterus, enlightenment, spiritual awakening and karmic cycles of past, present and future.

Carried on the wind - or by Alexander the Great - the cultural value of the lotus germinated in Ancient Greece. Pliny recorded the sacred flower and Homer's *Odyssey* told the story of Odysseus encountering the mythological

¹ For a detailed historiographical investigation of the Lotus, refer to Mark Griffiths, *The Lotus Quest: In Search for the Sacred Flower* (Chatto & Windus, London, 2009).

land of the lotus-eaters on his return voyage. Here the hero discovered an island of inhabitants who gorged on plentiful, narcotic lotus plants, creating a space where time dragged and dilated in a drugged-up, peaceful apathy.

The flower's symbolism makes it an apt, albeit problematic, rubric for the works in *Lotus*. The thematic concerns with problematising linear histories and knowledge production resonates with the lotus's own associations with the past, present and future of rebirth, temporality and divine non-knowledge. The artist's are not working directly in response to this culturally loaded flower, but nevertheless it is perhaps useful to consider the significance of the lotus, not as a means to bind cultural signifiers to the works - but as a way to tease out and explore the corresponding themes that coalesce in *Lotus*.

For an exhibition of predominantly object-making artists, the artworks in *Lotus* are surprisingly slight.² They seem to shy away from their three-dimensionality and make themselves felt through shapes and materials rather than volumetric presence. Miriam Austin and Wander Weiser's present wall based reliefs, Mary Hurrell and Holly White's almost two-dimensional pieces suspend from the ceiling, so slender that, when viewed side on, they almost compress to near nothingness, and the geometric forms in Candida Powell-Williams and Anna Hughes works are restrained and reduced. Making few demands of the space that they occupy, these sculptures are like a softly spoken voice that cannot quite be heard - they are not lost but their position is somehow fragile, as though they could slip off a map. We use space and its coordinates to orientate ourselves, but the same can also be said of time; the dial of a compass and the hands of a clock both enable us to situate ourselves in reality. But the sculptures in *Lotus* lean towards a temporal rather than spatial plane.

The splashes of colour in Powell-William's tarot dioramas seem to be emerging from the plaster forms whilst also being subsumed into the whiteness. Like flies in amber, Austin has set medicinal and poisonous plants and petals into anthropomorphic silicone shapes, creating the installation *Solanum* that evokes both preservation and disintegration. The copper elements in Weiser's work have oxidised, creating striations that mark the time past. Hurrell's pair of precariously strung-up steel shapes grazes the top of iron blocks with libidinal potentiality and Hughes's

² Beatrice Loft Schultz also presented a performance entitled *Sally*, but this was not available to view at the time of writing.

dried waxy serpentine casts are reminiscent of a snake's shed skin. The temporal qualities of *Lotus* do not stem from new technologies and time based media. Instead the obverse is true. Archaic rites and time old traditions borne from honouring the earth are hinted at through the artist's use of natural materials, like wax and flower petals, stones and crystals.

The exhibition as a whole feels impermanent and contingent, and with this comes a sense of cyclical inception and ritual. It is as though each artwork is undergoing it's own process of transubstantiation or transformation, coming into being.

As Marc Auge writes in *The Future*, ritual continues to entice us in our secular age because of its modes of temporality and potentiality. A ritual is a performative process that suspends the present to converge the past with the future, and so reimagine an alternative 'now'. Through re-performing ancestral rites and collective memory, an enhanced tomorrow is born from today's active hope. It is the production of possibility in the present. 'Beginning is the purpose of ritual', Auge describes, it is 'not a repetition ... it is 'starting'. Starting again is living through a new beginning, a birth'.³

Auge's essayistic book attempts to rescue the future from hyperbolically collapsing into the present - a 'future now' - by reimagining a future through 'conjunction' and inauguration as played out in ancient rituals, and therefore reclaiming its agency and potential from paralysis.⁴ But although Auge uses ritual as tool for founding his argument, he finds hope in the methods of science and hypothesis. The discipline continually moves to question the knowledge that it produces, and in doing so breaks with our conception of linear temporality, as new discoveries rewrite past understanding.⁵ For Auge it is the scientific epistemological drive for knowledge that constitutes our unknowns, rather than the occult and spirituality.

Is it reductive to posit technology and spirituality as diametrically opposed? Indeed, Maurice Tuchman, who oversaw the pioneering Art and Technology programme at LACMA 1967-71 and curated the seminal 1987 exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, describes

³ Marc Auge, *The Future*, trans. John Howe, 2014 (Verso, 2014) p. 23

⁴ Marc Auge, *The Future*, trans. John Howe, 2014 (Verso, 2014) pp. 3-4

⁵ Marc Auge, *The Future*, trans. John Howe, 2014 (Verso, 2014) pp. 81

spirituality and technology as 'opposite sides of the same coin'.⁶ Boris Groys has explored the intersection between technology and religion in essays surrounding his exhibition *Medium Religion*. Groys describes science as a space for the public production of knowledge, whereas faith is about private consumption of non-knowledge. The scientific drive means to be continually seeking to overcome non-knowledge. What is unknown in science is just not known yet, conversely religious non-knowledge is accepted as the 'ultimate unsurpassable horizon of human existence'.⁷

Within contemporary Western society, scientific knowledge does not remain a series of abstract concepts and discoveries - it converts into technological innovation and mass consumer products. When science crosses this bridge it ceases to be about intellectual production, and morphs into blind, faithful consumption. Groys explores this by thinking about the digital image and the internet. The vast majority of the world's population consume digital media without knowledge of how images can magic from numerical coding into pictures onto the screens in front of them - a transfiguration like Byzantine icon. Nor do we fully understand how endless information - both about us and the world - can be omnipresently stored in the ether. We navigate new technologies with wonder, a little of faith and a little fear, and develop new rituals in accordance with them. Auge's stipulation then, that 'technological innovations exploited by financial capitalism have replaced yesterday's myths', may be true.⁸ But in replacing mythologies, scientific advancements have reawakened our ability to privilege what is beyond our comprehension.

The sculptures in *Lotus* could be relics left over from ritualistic ceremonies, as tools and vehicles to connect to arcane non-knowledge. Hughes and Powell-Williams both directly pull on esoteric strategies to access the unknowable. Hughes uses a particular syntax in her sculpture *a Go Between* to reference scrying, a practice that connects an initiate with the unknown to find rationality within a chaotic nonsensical world. Powell-Williams' also works with divinatory modes, questioning the symbolism and stories that we conjure in order to establish meaning, purpose and a sense of knowing. But all of the works in *Lotus* seem to relate to systems of knowledge outside of Western empirical rationalisation. The subtle, slight objects seem to be the holders (and withholders) of arcane knowledge, the

⁶ As *Above So Below: Portals, Visions, Spirits and Mystics*, exh. Cat., Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2017. An Interview with Maurice Tuchman, Sam Thorne. P. 32

⁷ Boris Groys 'Religion in the Digital Age' in *Esse Art + Opinions: Religions* (2015) p. 7

⁸ Marc Auge, *The Future*, trans. John Howe, 2014 (Verso, 2014) p. 3

incantatory secret traditions passed on through word of mouth to gain enlightenment.

Since the dawn of the Enlightenment cosmological myths and rituals began to bow to physical explorations of the cosmos, as faith converted to secular scientific belief. In 1920 Max Weber prophesied that society's technological turn, focused on empirical and objective modes of production, would be to the detriment of subjective experience and intuitive faith - eradicating enchantment and creating disillusionment.⁹ Now our contemporary Western neoliberal world is made of totemic pyramidal structures, where knowledge is a form of scientific production disseminated by the institutional capitalist public sphere, subsuming private subjectivity. A counterculture has emerged. It eschews Western scientific discovery, secularism and homogenization. Mark Pilkington has called it the 'new new age'.¹⁰ Shamanic practice, yogic culture and holistic therapies are on the rise and this esoteric turn has been embraced by the visual arts. Increasingly spiritual or occult artists are no longer marginalised but are being recognised by major art institutions.

Lotus can be seen as a product (or part) of our contemporary 'new new age' narrative. Janus-like, the artists in *Lotus* gaze forward and back, inviting us to reimagine an enchanted alternative to our Western frameworks and consider how myth, ritual and non-knowledge can be deployed as an agent of political potentiality. What would our future hold if we operated outside of pyramidal power structures? What would be engendered if we were to flip the pyramid upside down? What potential is unleashed if we return to the enchanting temporal possibilities evoked by private ritual? The time for non-knowledge never ceased, it is simply being reborn.

Text by Antonia Shaw

Antonia Shaw is Assistant Curator at Hayward Gallery Touring, and is currently researching Western artistic consumption of Eastern yogic practice and philosophy.

⁹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993)

¹⁰ Mark Pilkington, 'Art and New Age Pyramid Scheming' in *Frieze*, 2017 [online]. Available at: <https://frieze.com/article/art-new-age-pyramid-scheming> [Accessed: 10 September 2017].

