



EILEEN AGAR
EMMA WITTER
Tender Resurrection

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Text by Lydia Figes

The near century separating British artists Eileen Agar (1899-1991) and Emma Witter (b.1989) is eroded through a deep reverence for the natural world - organic and fossilised matter - that appears in the delicate assemblages of their works, and *Tender Resurrection*. Revealing Witter's masterful transformation of neglected, forgotten materials into objects of artistic wonderment, the works on display are imbued with a quiet magic, recalling the spirit of Agar and bringing forth the Surrealist concept of the 'uncanny'. Familiar yet foreign, ordinary yet strange, the works suspended throughout *Tender Resurrection* enchant and beguile.

Along the Jurassic English coastline, Eileen Agar walked for miles in pursuit of the ideal found object. An avid beachcomber, her artistic universe appropriated nautical debris such as shells, coral, fossils and precious stones among other organic materials, such as skulls, horns and bones. And, as with Agar, whose curiosity magnetically pulled her towards the sea and coastlines, Witter too scours the beaches lining the River Thames, particularly the areas of Borough and Greenwich. Along the exposed riverbed one can discover strange debris; the silty, shallow waters regularly swallow up and spew out treasure that sparks Witter's imagination.

For materials, Witter also makes use of the culinary castaways from local butchers, restaurants and the nearby Borough Market: giant oyster shells, hollow bones, and pig skulls. They become vital ingredients in her artistic alchemy. She regards the river as a kind of laboratory for past and present; a repository for curious remnants that recall the sumptuous banquets of Tudor Palaces, evoked by works such as *Ostrich Egg Goblets*, 2023. Such artefacts inspire Witter to dream of The Palace of Placentia in Greenwich, where her riverbed discoveries may have once had a past life and which, after centuries of being submerged in the viscous black mud of the Thames, have now been chemically transformed into unrecognisable matter. The act of searching and therefore time travel is intrinsic to the artist's practice, echoing Agar's assertion that "one must have a hunger for new colour, new shapes and new possibilities of discovery."

Bone is a key material in *Tender Resurrection*, as seen in the works *Trade Bodies* and *Masks*, both dated 2023. By experimenting with the bodily materials, Witter reinvents what is no longer deemed valuable. Igniting disquiet, bone invokes the pictorial tradition of *memento mori* ('remember you will die') which can be discerned amongst the magnificent floral arrangements of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Flemish artists, such as Clara Peeters and Rachel Ruysch, in which subtle indicators of death dwelt amongst the decadence: decaying flowers, emptied shells, hollow skulls, and extinguished candles. Elsewhere in the gallery, we are reminded of life's transience, through the work *Loss and Damages* (2022) a pair of wall sconce candle holders enveloped in a mosaic of intricate shards of blue egg shells. Playful rather than unsettling, Witter resurrects and reinvents objects long after they have been abstracted from their original function.

Both Agar and Witter, share an understanding that materials of the natural world have their own agency. For that reason, their artistic process handles found objects with care and precision, often beginning with listening to the materials: "You see the shape of a tree, the way a pebble falls or is formed, and you are astounded to discover that dumb nature makes an effort to speak to you", Agar observed. In a similar vein, Witter allows her discoveries to guide her hands; each work is brought back to life and transformed into a kind of animistic relic.

Upon encountering the work of Agar, Witter immediately felt drawn to her humble yet seductive approach to sculpture - a stark contrast to the monumental, heavy forms created by male artists of the same generation. One of the only women artists to be designated a Surrealist in the 1930s, in reality Agar resisted such labels, forging her own aesthetic path. Similarly, Witter leans into her unique, 'quiet', non-invasive approach to sculpture, in which she allows organic matter to coalesce and harmonise through natural, chemical reactions. In this sense, Witter presents each work as if a kind of offering to the universe; an 'apology' in her own words.

Tender Resurrection highlights works on paper by Agar that embrace her distinctively feminine way of seeing and making. By the 1930s, Agar had developed her theory of 'womb magic' - signifying a female imagination and power that permeated her watercolours and paintings. Standing as a metaphor for the plight of women in history, we begin to see figurative forms breaking free from the rigid structures alluding to past traditions, as seen in the work *Dancers* and *The Dancer*, both from 1941. In the latter work, the silhouette of a male audience appears in the shadow of a female protagonist as she elegantly glides into the central composition.

A force of nature, like the chaotic and unruly seas she gravitated towards, Agar couldn't be contained, and this remains one hundred years later in the work of Witter. Agar and Witter propose alternative ways of working: one that is intuitive, imaginative and inherently compassionate towards nature. "Most of life's meaning is lost without a spirit of play" Agar concluded: "I play, all that is lovely and soaring in the human spirit strives to find expression. To play is to yield oneself to a kind of magic, and to give a lie to the inconvenient world of fact."

Design by Lida Koutromanou

Image on left: Detail of Emma Witter, *Trade Bodies*, 2023, bone, brass wire, 52 x 42 x 35 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Bosse & Baum.
Image on right: Detail of Eileen Agar, *Dancers*, 1941, frottage, wax crayon and chalk on paper, 33 x 24 cm. Image courtesy of Desmond Austin Fine Art.