

Carolyn Godsiff

"A garden... is the purest of human pleasures." Francis Bacon, 'Essays', 1625

"For all flesh is as grass... the grass withereth". Peter 1.24-1.25.

Carolyn Godsiff's untitled installation is akin to a new species of plant-life created from household materials: a magical floral display which defies gravity, and is both alluring and alarming. Godsiff's work, in resembling traditional still life compositions, invites us to examine the complex symbolic roles plants and flowers have played in visual art. Although flowers have embodied symbols of purity, vice, and power, the most common symbolic use of flora in the western tradition has been to signify fertility and plenty. Godsiff's work might, at one level, be read as a novel development of this tradition which inverts our expectations.

It might be thought that relatively few artists of recent times have successfully invested the genre of still life with new symbolic freight, dramatic potential, and formal possibilities. Even fewer have done so in sculpture. Godsiff approaches the problem of creating sculptural still life obliquely, by creating poetic form from the most prosaic of materials. As illustrated here, she uses only the most utilitarian and universally available found objects to give flight to imagery which yokes the fantastic and the ordinary. Domestic electrical equipment – plugs and cables – are present in every household and ubiquitous to the point of invisibility. The domestic plug is an object made to be overlooked; its design excludes all aesthetic considerations. Its transformation into an object of delight is, therefore, all the more startling.

Initially, we might imagine that Godsiff's work offers a display of virtuoso skills – it is easy to be enraptured by the facility and exquisite care deployed in its creation. However, her method is more aptly described as an appropriation of craft techniques which are deployed to widen the frames of reference drawn into the work's meaning. As she remarks, "the technique used in constructing the flowers adapts a South African craft which many women and children use to make toys and trinkets from discarded wire and tins, to earn a living. Whilst not directly relating to South Africa, the work references the ingenuity employed in recycling waste products I have observed there. Secondly, in using this craft technique there are parallels to be drawn to the trade in plants between the West and developing nations. As the flowers are exotic and unfamiliar, there is a sense of them having to have been displaced from their natural habitat to be in a gallery space. The sale of plants, though regulated, often depends on theft or trafficking." Godsiff's floral life, it soon becomes apparent, offers one of the least pure of human pleasures – one made possible through networks of trade as closely woven as her wiring.

Her work also offers the pleasure of 'mimesis' – that is to say, the illusion of life conjured from inert materials. The artist's process might be described as based around an intentional 'untruth to materials' where medium and message or subject matter sit in tension. At one level, though copper is a precious metal, it is, like flowers, dug from the earth: there is an implied contrast, followed by an implicit comparison. The wires' plastic cases, though, are transformed into animate lifeforms, from innocuous and inert consumer goods. From being at the margins of our attention, they swirl organically around the gallery and bloom into arabesque forms. The illusion that they are defying gravity similarly seduces us, whilst offering more contradictory connotations. As the artist elucidates, "although rendered useless and without 'life', by using the metal core and exploiting it as an electrical conductor, the flowers take on an alternative 'life force' of their own. They are 'alive' by being 'live'. Their plugs become roots, the lights become bulbs, the filaments of the wire as delicate as leaves, the insulation becomes the stalk and the shadows cast become their future growth." Most obviously, these flowers carry an alarming, uncanny form of vitality at odds with the traditional connotations of 'fertility' associated with organic life outlined above. As illustrated, each flower is delightfully tactile – though we know that contact with 'live' matter would arrest our own vitality. As such the objects are akin to an as-yet-unknown poisonous species, whose beauty belies its danger. Accordingly Godsiff's work is better described as 'nature morte' than as still life. Such alarming sets of connotations begin to complicate the ways in which it might be read, and indeed the artist intends the work to refer to the other ritual functions which flowers play, such as commemorative ones. As she remarks, "the transience of flowers links them with mortality, especially when they are picked to honour the memory of the dead." Godsiff's intellectual dexterity means that whilst she works by engaging with very particular materials, these materials carry both 'universal' resonances and a pointed social engagement.