

'You Staring at Me and an Oak Tree Staring at Each Other for 24 hours.- Live stream'

2 July
11.28

Absurd

I'm sitting here in my Hackney studio listening to all the bird song in Aberystwyth. Through my screen I am looking out onto the everyday setting of a small fenced off patio garden, table, tent, chair and a pot housing a thin, fragile yet insistent oak tree. At first it appears commonplace, but continued looking suggests a thoughtful formal arrangement. I think I can sense soft, transient movements – is it a breeze or breath? I also sense a human presence but appear to be alone. I think Miranda is there somewhere, attentive, watching, but I'm unable to see her. I just quietly sit in the same imagined space. Waiting – for what? Watching something.

I attend to my drawing and in a few minutes return to the screen to see Miranda seated – staring at the oak tree. I'm watching Miranda watching an oak tree. Absurd.

But is it 'Absurd'? I am now thinking of absurdity. Is the absurd, life without reason? Is it pointless, futile, and illogical actions repeated over and over? Sitting here watching someone else watch an oak tree certainly signals such a position. Are we sitting here thinking about the potential (in)significance that an individual can have on existence? Are we questioning the (un)importance her actions can make on the wider world? And apparently such an uncertain world. And the scale of it all, one person staring at an oak tree as if that is going to make a difference – it is ridiculous, isn't it?

A Book of Hours

And yet there seems such purpose and intent. After a few repetitions I realise there is a rigorous structure to the ritual. Miranda stares, beep. Miranda walks to the tent, beep. There is a base camp mentality and a certain kind of pragmatism or ordinariness in the checking of equipment, charging, recording, zipping, unzipping, water, monitors, Olive the cat. And yet it's all a bit extra-ordinary – almost an hourly devotional routine.

12.24

Do you now ask what rule ye anchoresses should observe?

I'm sitting here in my studio in Hackney working alongside Miranda, drawing an anchorite. I have a book next to me, Hermits and Anchorites of England written by Rotha Mary Clay in 1914. I am reading stories of characters who withdraw in order to eliminate worldly distractions and focus solely on a relationship with God. I am considering words like contemplation, denial, rigour, observance, a reflection on spiritual matters, but also an index of rules and practices.

Miranda is in the tent, my anchoress in her cell. Apparently the 'solitary' was not condemned to utter separation and silence, the 'Rules' advise fellowship with another of like mind and purpose.

We can both hear the seagulls.

13.35

'A bird sometimes alighteth on the earth, to seek his food for the need of the Resh..... Even so, the pious recluse, though she fly ever so high, must at times come down to the earth in respect of her body – and eat, drink, sleep, work, speak, and hear, when it is necessary, of earthly things. – Ancren Riwle'.

Miranda is eating, we are synchronised, I'm eating too, rice, grains and salad. I'm finding it comforting that we are both attending to food – two creatures munching quietly as witnessed by the oak tree.

22.24

I am in bed and Miranda is outside in the darkness. Her head the source of light tucked inside a bright orange cocoon. Now the scene looks like a Zurburan Still Life, raking light hitting table, pot and dustbin. I can just make out some cooking equipment, maybe dish, cup, spoon and then a fathomless blackness. Miranda is still, staring. I am thinking about the Zurburan still life, his pious attention to these mystical everyday kitchen objects..

'Know that even when you are in the kitchen, our Lord moves amidst the pots and pans.'
St Teresa of Avilla

3 July

8.18

It's morning, a chorus of birdsong and Miranda is staring at the oak tree. Olive the cat has decided to join her. She looks totally serene. I have been asleep for seven hours and I'm trying to imagine the ritualised observance of Miranda's vigil.

24 Hours livestream.

What has she been thinking? I know her work is born out of a connection to the environment. I know as part of her practice she has engaged with scientists in an attempt to understand methodology, evidence and information from the material world. And here am I imagining the world of Hermits and Anchorites, this world of faith and mystics so alien to our thinking today. How weird to think your rituals and small everyday actions could have any impact at all on life and existence? Just imagine, in this rational, science-centred world of ours, if some people decided to live and crawl around woods, or create hourly devotions from a little cell. How absurd!

Suzanne Holtom

