

Dickon Drury

Ants on Mushrooms in the Snow

The eagerness of objects to
Be what we are afraid to do

Cannot help but move us Is
this willingness to be a motive

in us what we reject? The
really stupid things, I mean

a can of coffee, a 35¢ ear
ring, a handful of hair, what

do these things do to us? We
come into the room, the windows

are empty, the sun is weak
and slippery on the ice And a

sob comes, simply because it is
coldest of the things we know

—Frank O'Hara, *Interior (With Jane)*

The table describes
nothing: four legs, by which
it becomes a table. Four lines
by which it becomes a quatrain,

The poem that lifts the dish
of fruit, if we say it is like
a table — how will it describe
the content of the poem

—William Carlos Williams, *The Dish of Fruit*

Ants on Mushrooms in the Snow

William Carlos Williams's *The Dish of Fruit* begins with a deceptively simple proposition, "The table describes nothing." Four legs make a table; four lines make a quatrain; and from these lines comes the dish of fruit. Yet neither structure ultimately tells us what the fruit is. The poem is less interested in describing the fruit than in asking what happens when things are given form: a table is not simply a table, nor a poem simply a container for its subject. Form makes the thing visible, but never quite exhausts it. Williams leaves us with a question: if the poem can lift the dish of fruit into language, what, then, can describe the contents of the poem? This question sits, too, at the centre of Dickon Drury's paintings. His paintings are situated within the long history of still life, whilst resisting the idea that still life means stillness. His is a quiet magic, close to that particular tradition of British painting that holds in its grasp the bewitchment of the quotidian, the slippage of the ordinary into myth, and the quiet confrontation between the self and the world immediately around it. There is something of Bruegel here, where the smallest things are allowed to carry the weight of an entire world.

A room can begin with things - a can of chickpeas, a knife, a trug of mushrooms, a postcard - each apparently insignificant until they begin to exert themselves. They gather histories, attract attention, and trigger memory. In Drury's paintings, fruit, vegetables, insects, vessels, and possessions are gathered into carefully constructed arrangements that appear familiar, yet are never entirely settled. A potato roots and ginger sprouts, yet both will later decay. Objects lean, accumulate and threaten to fall. The ordinary begins to behave as if it has a life of its own. This is close to the strange charge of Frank O'Hara's *Interior (With Jane)*, wherein objects seem to possess an eagerness of their own. Nothing much happens: a room, empty windows, weak winter light, a few ordinary things. And yet suddenly emotion arrives. The insignificant becomes significant simply through attention. Drury's paintings ask for this kind of attention. Their objects are not merely symbols waiting to be decoded. They touch, resist, attract, shelter, decry and transform.

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As in the novels of Rachel Cusk or Iris Murdoch, the everyday is not the opposite of the significant, it is the material through which significance arrives. A life, therefore, is not necessarily revealed through its grand events but through its arrangements, repetitions, habits, and collections: what has been noticed, kept or left behind. Drury's work is alert to the difficulty of turning these fragments into a coherent story, to the way objects can suggest a life without ever explaining it. There is something here, too, of Murdoch's understanding of attention, the attempt to look beyond the self and allow the world to exist in its particularity. For Murdoch, attention is a kind of discipline, a movement away from the fantasies and preoccupations through which we habitually arrange the world, towards a more patient recognition of what is actually there. This has a particular resonance in Drury's paintings. His objects do not only insist upon interpretation, they ask to be looked at. A potato is allowed to remain a potato, a mushroom a mushroom, a postcard a postcard, even as each begins to gather associations of memory, mortality, labour and desire. The significance does not replace the thing itself, but accumulates around it. In this sense, the everyday becomes a practice of looking. To attend to what is close at hand is to discover that the ordinary world is already more strange, more independent and more abundant than we had imagined.

A mushroom carries its growth and disappearance within it whilst belonging to a life that is largely concealed from us, a life of intricate connections and dependencies, of the strange intelligence of networks, of the old practice of foraging, and all that is contained therein: memory, knowledge, necessity, attention and a particular way of living with the world. Vegetables, too, within his paintings are already moving towards their end, just as an insect can alter the rhythm of an entire composition simply by being there. Even the paint is alive to this encounter. Oil moves, pools, drags and dries. Pigment meets linen, the brush meets resistance. The image emerges through a negotiation between intention and material, rather than through the complete submission of one to the other. The same tension exists within the depicted world: things have been arranged, but they retain their own trajectories. The painting therefore becomes less a collection of objects than a gathering of forces. This is particularly apparent in *Ants on Mushrooms in the Snow*, where the relationship between insect and fungi unsettles the usual hierarchy of the still life. The ants do not simply decorate the mushrooms, their activity changes what it is. The Mushroom, in turn, changes our perception of the ants. Nothing is entirely passive. Yet neither is anything entirely free.

Drury's paintings are meticulously composed. Their worlds have been made, ordered, and held together. There is something almost preparatory about them: the gathering and storing of things against an uncertain future, the desire to preserve what might otherwise be lost. Boxes are packed, objects are protected, possessions are accumulated. But this attempt at control is continually undermined by the materials themselves. The vegetable rots. The mushroom changes. The ants move. The paint dries. The territory of the painting holds, but it does not hold still. This tension gives Drury's domestic objects their particular poignancy.

In works such as *Past Lots*, possessions become clues to lives that remain just outside the picture. A box, a cabinet, a piece of poetry or a sculpture can suggest care, neglect, appetite, preservation, loss. The people are absent, but the things remain. A room becomes a biography without a body. There is something of Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* in this way of looking; a life reconstructed from what surrounds it. Furniture, photographs, clothes, food, and possessions become fragments of stories whose central characters may never appear. Drury's paintings similarly ask us to invent the lives that have passed through these rooms. The objects are intimate precisely because they are ordinary. The postcards in *Key Cabinet* perhaps come closest to Drury himself. Not as straightforward autobiography, but as selection. A life disclosed through what has been noticed and kept. This makes the still life a curious form of storytelling. It can speak about people without depicting them, and about time without depicting movement. Elsewhere becomes something held within the domestic interior: distance turned into possession, memory turned into object. Possessions are rarely simply incidental, they are the surfaces through which a life becomes visible.

Williams's poem returns us to the same problem. The table gives the fruit somewhere to be, just as the poem gives it somewhere to appear. But neither can finally contain it. The fruit remains more than its description. Drury's paintings extend this paradox. They preserve things whilst allowing us to sense their change. A painted flower is both an image and a record of something passing. Fruit is simultaneously food, possession, biological matter, and future waste. An insect appears to have been caught by the picture, yet its presence makes the whole arrangement move. The painting gives things a territory without enclosing them. Perhaps this is where Drury's still lifes are most alive, not in the moment when everything has been successfully arranged, but in the moment when that arrangement begins to reveal everything it cannot control. The dish of fruit is never simply a dish of fruit. The table stands on four legs. The painting sits on its canvas. But the fruit keeps changing.

Christopher Mayer