Jane Topping

They are the We of Me

Jane Topping's exhibition for the Gallery of Modern Art draws its main inspiration from

Carson McCullers, the celebrated American author of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

(1940), *A Member of the Wedding* (1946) and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951).

McCullers wrote novels and stories that were mainly inspired by her memories of

growing up in the Deep American South.   They centred on a cast of odd-ball figures

and are notable for their obsessions with melancholy and loneliness, their harsh sense

of humour and their potent sense of character and place (achieved through a strong eye

and ear for detail).   McCullers' own life was scarcely less eventful than that of the

characters in her stories.   A literary success at the tender age of 23, she became

closely involved with the New York literary and cultural scene of the wartime period (the

poet W.H. Auden and the writer and musical-star Gypsy Rose Lee were among her

close friends).   At aged 31 she suffered a stroke which left her entire left side

paralysed, but, despite the physical impediments this affliction caused her, she

continued to write up until her death in 1967.

It is somewhat puzzling that Topping should invoke McCullers as the central 'thing or

presence behind the whole show'.   Not least because there are no figures or portraits

in the exhibition, only a variety of fragmented still lifes and landscapes, resulting in what

Topping describes as 'a figurative show without figures'. Furthermore it would seem that

Topping has been less compelled by McCullers' sad and colourful personal history than

by McCullers' particular conception of a creative process.   Working in visual, sculptural

and sometimes textual media, Topping has accumulated what could be described as an

oblique visual analysis of McCullers' working method.   In doing so she has engaged

with themes that are fundamental to artistic and literary endeavour, including the

mundanity of creative labour, the aesthetic and structural importance of detail, and

emotions relating to absence, longing and belonging.

McCullers described her own difficult path towards creative fulfilment as a struggle

between 'labour and the unconscious'.   Commenting on the imaginative origins of her

novels, she wrote that 'I understand only particles.   I understand the characters, but the

novel itself is not in focus. The focus comes at random moments which no one can

understand, least of all the author. For me, they usually follow great effort'.

Like McCullers, Topping begins her creative process with a random selection of

disconnected elements or 'particles'.   Her paintings are developed from a varied stock

of images and texts, derived from a range of sources including magazine pages and old

art-history books.   Having transcribed and painted her chosen images, Topping tests

out different fonts and type-faces before deciding on the final configuration of word and image.   This process of trial-and-error is continued right up until the moment that the work is installed in the gallery space.   Even at the final stage of presentation, decisions and rejections will be made. Some works that have been made will not be included. Unexpected results will occur when a painting is placed next to a drawing or a sculpture next to a found object.

This labour-intensive process is comparable to the way in which a novelist goes through different drafts and edits before arriving at the finished story, changing a word here or altering the sentence-structure there to achieve the perfect flow of a story.   Where Topping's art differs from a work of literary fiction is that, in its completed state, it refuses to provide any clearly readable narrative.   The simultaneous promise and frustration of 'meaning' is among the ways in which it builds longing and absence into an abrasive dialogue with the viewer, playing off the viewer's demand that art have symbolic significance against the troubling lack of any such readability.   At one level, the coherence of Topping's paintings and drawings are merely formal, residing in the abstract shape of the words within the frame, the colouring and composition of the images and so on.   On the other hand, an aspect of this coherence is also emotional, achieved in the strange resonance created by certain phrases when juxtaposed with certain forms.

Moreover, the viewer is unable to avoid the sense that the images in Topping's art have, like the fragments of text they accompany, been 'quoted' out of context.   Topping's compositions are often close-ups, tiny sections of paintings, photographs or book-covers that have been enlarged.   A telescopic eye for detail is also characteristic of McCullers' writing which is often painterly in its vividness.   Indeed Topping sees a similarity between McCullers' observational methods and those of another of her influences, the sixteenth century Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel.   This is especially as regards an attention to detail, and an interest in the relationship of individual pictorial or narrative components to a complete work of art.   It has been observed of Bruegel's bustling, urgent compositions that: 'the small scale of the figures establishes, by contrast with the space they inhabit, the frailty of the human species'.   Similarly, referring to her own writing, McCullers said that, 'details provoke more ideas than any generality could furnish'. In the short story *The Ballad of the Sad Café* she inexplicably enriches the characterisation of her heroine, Miss Amelia, by observing that after a meal she often 'tilted back her chair, tightened her fist, and felt the hard supple muscles of her right arm beneath the clean, blue cloth of her shirtsleeves' .   In another of her stories a young musical prodigy is described as smelling of 'corduroy pants and rosin'; his hands are 'thin only at the joints with the hard little blobs of flesh bulging over the short-cut nails'.   McCullers' searching eye, her ability to evoke smells textures and subtleties of human behaviour are comparable to Bruegel's extraordinary powers of delineation.

Topping enjoys the perplexing affect on the viewer when such carefully interwoven details are displaced and scrambled.   The interesting question for Topping is whether such details *precede* the overall structures of art-works in the imaginations of their creators.   McCullers had a fascination for random bits of memory as the catalysts of creativity; she cited her friend and contemporary Tennessee Williams who attributed the inspiration for his play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) to a 'glass curtain he saw at the house of one of his grandfather's parishioners' when he was a child.   Building on the idea that a glass curtain might suggest an entire play, or an object glimpsed in childhood might shape an artist's entire practice, Topping's final installation centres around a reproduction of Bruegel's painting *The Peasant Wedding* (c.1568), borrowed from her parents house.   An object familiar from her childhood, the Bruegel has been a recurrent source of inspiration for Topping.   But the objects which surround it here seem to lurk gingerly on the edge of a misty subconscious.   They look half-realised, like images that are still taking shape in the artist's imagination and haven't yet arrived at a definite form.   As such they contrast rather brutally with the satisfying world of wholeness embodied in Bruegel's painting.

Topping's sculptures, like her paintings, resemble details extracted from pictures, or stray phrases banished out of texts, dislocated elements that have floated free of a complex organised structure.   As objects without a logical place in a picture or

narrative -one which would give them clear meaning – the individual art works resemble McCullers' dysfunctional characters who are often excluded or outcast figures, isolated by their 'incapacity to love or receive love'.   What McCullers attempted to describe using characters and feelings in literary fiction, Topping attempts to analyse without recourse to the human figure.   In doing so she creates a kind of abstracted meditation on the themes of exclusion and belonging, rethinking them in terms of the formal relationship between detail and totality in visual works of art.

This kind of object-based symbolism was a strong characteristic of Tennessee Williams' writing which often used artefacts as projections of his characters' desires and predicaments.   Williams' memory of a 'glass curtain' triggered his particular fascination with the poignantly fragile ornaments in *The Glass Menagerie*.   McCullers was unable to fathom 'how the recollection of that curtain fitted into the memories of his boyhood', but she concluded that 'the unconscious is not easily understood'.   Topping's portraits of the unconscious are likewise difficult to comprehend.   They resemble the vivid fragments of a scattered jigsaw-puzzle - the completed picture of which she declines, teasingly, to reveal.

Laurence Figgis 2005

Carson McCullers, 'The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing'; *Esquire*, December 1959
McCullers, 'The Flowering Dream'
Keith Roberts, *Breugel,* Phaidon 1971, p.14
McCullers, 'The Flowering Dream'
Carson McCullers, 'The Ballad of the Sad Café' in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*; Houghton Miflin Co. 1951, p.17
McCullers, 'Wunderkind' in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, p.94
McCullers, 'The Flowering Dream'
McCullers, 'The Flowering Dream'
McCullers, 'The Flowering Dream'