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JANE TOPPING

JANE TOPPING, THEY ARE THE WE OF ME, UNTITLED REVIEW no.36, p.66

GoMA, Glasgow, 15th September-20th November 2005

Jane Topping's solo show at Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art is permeated by an almost disquieting degree of self-reflexiveness, as her recollected impressions of the life and work of American novelist Carson McCullers (1917-1967) activate an investigation of the creative process.

The exhibition is a three-room installation, better described as two rooms both separated and linked by a short corridor. Topping's studio is represented by one room and McCullers' by the other, their separation emphasising the solitary activity of much art making, while elements common to both spaces promote a sense of shared endeavour. Indeed emotional isolation coupled with a need to belong and the co-dependence of both feelings forms the crux of McCullers' writing and is evinced in the show's title, a line from her novel *The Member of the Wedding*.

The frustrations and distractions that seem to hamper the creative process and yet are always an essential part of it are alluded to in Topping's staged reincarnation of McCuller's treasured room in February House, an artists' commune situated in Brooklyn in the early 1940s. For McCullers, those distractions came in the form of excessive drinking, unrequited obsessions with various charismatic women, a troubled relationship with her husband, and protracted bouts of sickness. While details of the writer's unconventional life and work are compelling, what is clear from the outset is that this is no straightforward homage paid by one artist to another. Using McCullers' work and life as a sort of anchoring device, questions of why an artist makes art and how are posed throughout the space in a series of framed fragments and staged scenes drawn from memory.

Topping describes ways that, in the struggle to make work, cognizance surrenders to a kind of intuition as memory fragments invade the present, transformed, misremembered, but resolutely important somehow in their persistence. An example is the reproduction Bruegel that hangs in the end room, borrowed from Topping's parents' dining room. A treasured image from childhood, it has been an enduring, though often subliminal, influence on her work. Process is staged and displayed over outcome by presenting the snippets of things that are, or become, influential as the work develops. In fact the notion of displaying that which is usually 'behind the scenes' is emphasised through the intentional staginess of the work, particularly in the last room, entered by walking around an imposing green door, its simplistic trompe l'oeil surface mimicking the conventions of stage design, replete with simple wooden frame and sandbag securing it at the back. Here Topping brings the private domestic space into the public space of the gallery, even transposing its stock white walls with the dark Empire green of McCullers' lodgings, while in the first room it is Topping's own studio that infiltrates the gallery in a series of charcoal drawings of her studio walls, detailing some of the research undertaken for this exhibition in the form of clippings and sketches.

McCullers' room is also implied through, what appears to be, a collection of preparatory work, each element framed and displayed as though finished. A typewriter is represented simply by the brand name Triumph in one drawing which also includes a flower. A second drawing in the room

contains the word Sugarville, a place name from one of her novels, and a drawing of a human skull sprouting twigs. Both drawings represent lasting impressions of McCullers' work, while suggesting the life-cycle of any creative process. The writer often used the idea of budding and flowering as an analogy for writing and the formation of ideas.

A landscape and seascape, a kind of visual correlative of McCullers' writing, have been painted from memories of Bruegel's work overlaid with short lines from McCullers' novels. This investigation of the collision of influences continues throughout the show through the use of such contiguity. For instance, shoved into a corner of the frame of the Bruegel is a magazine picture of a typical teenage girl's bedroom in the 70s or 80s. This apposition succinctly suggests Topping's own adolescence spent (in part) looking at and drawing the print, while imitating the notice-board style of bedroom and studio walls.

The show takes us from studio walls, to the writer's study, to the teenager's bedroom, and back again. Virginia Woolf's insistence on the importance of 'a room of one's own' resonates profoundly here as McCullers herself had left the cramped rooms she shared with her husband to set up home in the creative community of February House. By evoking these spaces, Topping also pays tribute to women's private places of self-discovery, experimentation, and work.

There is a circular economy to this show that links each work to the whole. Consequently the entire show must be viewed in order to understand any individual work it contains. In her 1959 essay on writing practice 'The Flowering Dream' McCullers wrote that "the dimensions of a work of art are seldom realized by the author until the work is accomplished." Topping gives material form to the cues and traces from which the work (show) takes its completed shape, leaving us mindful that somehow, and in unexpected ways, acknowledged influences coalesce with recollected detail, the significance of which always remains elusive.

Sarah Smith 2005