

The Drawing Stone

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As two abrasive surfaces rub together, becoming particles and heat, they get smoother. Closing the creviced spaces between them their jagged edges disperse, puffing away into the air, falling as sediment. They change together and give to each other a grain. To be able to perceive the grain, the traces of exchange and disintegration, a closeness is needed again. So closely pored over, so thoroughly and continually marked, material appearance collapses into noise and an attentive sensitivity to this noise overtakes observational comprehension, nurturing an alertness to the relationships between presences.

There is something contained in this body of James' work, between the delicate material instability and the committed act, which causes me to catch at the exchange of touch and want to stay closely by it. Or should it be the committed materiality and the delicate act? Either way it's a reciprocal act of rubbing, where the one which rubs is also rubbed by, leaving both parties coated and burnished, both grimy and glossy. This is the effect. A glossy grime. A perfect grimey gloss. A crystalline layer of carbon atoms, in some lights a dull, humble grey - but this is graphite, an elemental sibling of diamond, highly conductive and resistant. A conduit for power to rush through. If you run a high electric current through a graphite pencil it combusts, charring the wood yet leaving the graphite rod unchanged. If a certain voltage were to be sent through one of these carbon veneers would it spark, throb with a hot glow, flash bright white with a bang, cause the cotton or linen threads to curl smouldering away? Or singe its smooth wooden host but then, once the volts had died down again, appear from the outside as though nothing had happened – its sheen and patina as ever: fine, morose, glittering/denying that it did so?

Here, graphite, 'the writing stone', the erasable trace of the pencil – propositional and communicative - becomes an unbroken coat of mineral. In service of neither word nor mark the graphite as matter ground into a surface still however draws to its object a sense of proposition and can still be legible maybe as a letter. As though the graphite is here a mode of transmitting a gesture or feeling to others - to named recipients. I want to say it still makes a love letter.

As I think about the names given to these pieces – Samuel, Daniel, Joseph, Jacob – who are presences in the network of the pieces relations, I think about form-name-likeness: of what it is for something to be like something else, to name in likeness. Graphite archaically was called *plumbago*, meaning to resemble (*agere*) lead (*plumbum*). This slippage of appearance and likeness led too to the graphite in pencils being known as pencil lead, and to the name of the plumbago flower – with petals of a cloudy yet bright grey-blue, who's sap leaves a lead-coloured stain on

skin, and which was believed by Pliny the Elder, the first person recorded to use the name, to provide a cure for lead poisoning. There's a soft style, a pillowy absorption of atmosphere, not a colour but the way that a colour is. A person, a petal, a metal, a mineral.

A collection of qualities, of glosses and grimes, goes like, like, like: like a sun-starved under-leaf, like moisture on a dark rock in a clouded light, like squinting in the aching brightness of a smog, like a sequin putting gold sky in the gravelly dirt, like pointing to your face reflected in your knee in the bath.

(A photograph of a plumbago flower inverted becomes what appears to be an image of a flower made of brass. Its odd tone and texture of cool gold-yellow an inversion of the warm blue-grey. This discovery is arbitrary, whimsical, serendipitous. Uncertainly, I'll keep it in.)

When the surface of the objects – the wood stretcher-bars, woven canvasses, flesh fingers – become coated in graphite, become with sheen, they become in a number of ways photographic, joining an interaction back and forth between space and light, developing and fixing. As they become light reflective objects, to be photographed, they seem too to have become their silvery selves in black-and-white prints. As they are coated in a shimmery membrane, sensitive and exposed, it is as though the mineral has enabled them to draw with light.

In some pieces, a brass shim, less than half a millimetre thick, has been wrapped over timber – folded at the edges and corners like canvas over a stretcher - and hammered in different ways, causing the reflection to distort. It is fragile and thin, like a layer of skin. In others, brass is applied as a smooth panel. Like the graphite but differently it is rubbed and rubbed, in a struggle against its proclivity to smear, to record every touch, until it shines and reflects, until finger touches twin finger. By mirroring it widens space, connecting what it is with where it is and who it is with, and it makes these connections in a golden light which saturates them in an understanding of the workings of desire. In a desirous narrative of glow and reflection, touch and trace, permeation and exchange.

There's a sense, in this body of work, of the artist having found in the subtle changeability and environmental sensitivity of the graphite and brass a way for things to be which has the right feel. A way for things to be which is affected by conditions and space and the presence of others. Which takes on, extends, and reflects. As if these are articulated states of being-in-relation. Networks of relationships are established and at times these emerges as dualities, where one thing becomes understood in relation to a particular other thing: brass and graphite, material and body, self and other. But rather than these being portrayed as distinct binaries an attentiveness to interrelation, touching, process and cross pollination creates an

attunement instead to intimate details of the differences within, of the overlaps, and of the becoming of each other.

In places the brass and graphite physically touch one another. In these small but intense interactions - in the soft glow of gold in the grey-sheened weave, as in the calling out to another's name, as in the methods of joining, as in the schemes of connecting - there is something like a critical intimacy, which ripples the unbroken surfaces of the objects with subjectivities, which considers the ways that attachments are created to and between ideas and things and people.