

A portrait of a home: traces and touch

by Krasimira Butseva

As our eyes walk through the photographs, the inanimate dwellers welcome them in. We encounter relief surfaces, garments and storage spaces. The camera leaves us to piece together, link, tie and fabricate the apparent and invisible narrative going across the three series. At first sight, the different components, processes and subjects collated in *The Whispering Gallery: Vessels, Skins & Portals* transport us to an imagined evidence board holding all the strings of this visual study.

Throughout this work, Alexandra Diez de Rivera has acquired the role of a historical archaeologist – devoting her time to the collection, selection and documentation of objects from past lives. All of the artefacts come from a personal and intimate location to the author, her stepfather's family home.

In the series *Vessels*, instead of objects we come across their shells only. The creases, curves and corners shape a perception, hint to ideas – but remain incapable of materialising the exact and precise artefacts that once inhabited the insides. Not only the photograph is left up to our interpretation, but the photographed too. The shucks of firearms, medals, coins, and crosses articulate gaps, colours and materials. Our imagination quickly carves the absent objects – as if we have faced them prior. We hurry to reach a familiarity. The boxes resemble tombs, covered with soft velvet, waiting to hold the twists of the bodies. The vacancy causes a greater wish to encounter, to hold, to touch the object.

In another part of this body of work – *Skins*, we gaze at highly contrasted black and white images, which, although visually resembling X-ray scans, depict quite the opposite – everything but the bones or the body. Dresses and attires, a ruffle and hairlock are pressed, exposed and hand-printed onto light-sensitive paper. The hairlock references the Victorian times, when lockets were a companion to daguerreotypes, as they helped to overcome the limitations of the photographic by allowing sight to be joined by touch¹. The imprints of the objects are also life-sized reconstructions, aiding further the deception of encountering the real object. These items carry both memory and time, alongside the DNA of their owners – through the skin cells and body oils compressed within, laid on photographic paper.

We are left to the closing fragments of this work in *Portals*, where once again we discover empty and vacant areas. This time through the furniture – a home's prevalent inhabitant. The shelves which once stored the relics of the living, mirroring the continuous lives of the house's inhabitants, are now emptied, alongside the seats which have been occupied by presence and prayer for decades. The negative space is a common aspect in all the photographs. A space lacking subject matter, easily overlooked by the eye, here it acts as the activating force, the catalyst of the images.

These photographs offer us a trace, a proof and a guarantee of the physical object. They are an aftermath of the real, but translate an altered experience of it. Although they reach the sight as an echo of the referent², they also open possibilities for new readings of the objects.

The notion of touch is present throughout the series. The clothing and objects have touched the black and white paper to leave their mark. The empty boxes are printed by the artist in their precise, real life scale, tricking us to believe that if we reach out, we will feel the vacant twists.

¹ Batchen, G. (2004) *Forget me Not. Photography & Remembrance*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

² Sontag, S. (1997) *On Photography*. Penguin Books.

The shelves and seats were occupied by the touch of these same objects and the bodies of the family members.

In *The Whispering Gallery: Vessels, Skins & Portals*, we glance upon a complex and multi-layered portrait of a house, of a home, of the history of a family. Yet we never perceive the house in its architectural entity, nor do we see the members of the family in revealing portraits. We only encounter the material remains of their histories through the items lodging in the home, and the rest is left to our own reconstruction.