

Gather Your Phantoms

“It happened but I do not know it—that it happened or what it was
that happened, the eventless event, unremembered.”
Griselda Pollock

The traumatic event is not to be found: to never be found completely. Janice Gobey’s recent paintings draw forth subjects that are alluring, obscured, frightening, and in their collaboration, slippery. From where these belong is not a specified place—more of an *elsewhere*—where objects, faces and fragments linger in a kind of waiting.

i. wounds

Defined quite literally as a wound, trauma exists as a form of ‘psychic injury’ that is repressed and difficult to summon. Its existence is stemmed in a particular event, yet for the psychological experience to be traumatic, the memory of the event in question is always, at all traumatic times, unknowable. In keeping, it has been defined as “the event par excellence, the event as unintelligible, as the pure act of sheer happening.”ⁱ Therefore, when recalling trauma, it comes to us only in pieces. As Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg describe, trauma is “an experience so overwhelming that its understanding is at best deferred and its very apprehension may only be through symptomatic representations.”ⁱⁱ As the event is recalled in fragments, it disallows us to completely unify trauma’s conundrum. Yet when these fragments align, and our event makes itself known, trauma, like a great mystery, dissolves.

Symptomatically, the elusive nature of trauma is a problem for the practice of representation in art. Whereas it was believed that Greek Tragedy could successfully incorporate the event into narrative, it wasn’t until Modernism that the problem with representing this unknowable occurrence was addressed.ⁱⁱⁱ At this time, trauma became a paradoxical subject in art: although it could be made visible, it would always remain true to its negated, unknowable character. For this reason it is questionable whether trauma can ever truly be represented. As modern history became defined by “an ending succession of catastrophic events” artworks became “overwhelming failures” in capturing these tragic realities in material form.^{iv}

ii. Beelitz, Germany

When Gobey first arrived in Berlin to start a three-month artist’s residency in 2012, a friend introduced her to the abandoned and condemned Beelitz sanitarium. Built in 1866, the compound comprises sixty-nine buildings, with a train line intersecting the site from one direction and a road from the other. The hospital was used as respite for the fatally ill, war torn, and insane; famously housing Hitler at one stage as he recovered from an injury inflicted at the Battle of the Somme.

Gobey describes entering the forbidden site, its walls boarded up to deter trespassers. Accompanied by a local artist who had regularly visited the working hospital when his

friend attempted suicide, the couple walked through old rooms that were now mere ruins, marked with broken stairways, holey floorboards, rusty bed heads and disowned chairs. The walls were covered in the transient scars of graffiti. Memorably, part of the visit explored the basement: a claustrophobic series of rooms encrusted in rust-covered white tiles. Nature did what it does to bones, as the thick forest that surrounded the decrepit building encroached on the architecture, with trees now growing out of roofs from several floors above the ground in a surreal display.

On this visit, Gobey took with her a fur found at the bohemian Maeurpark Flee Market. According to the artist, this particular piece was going to “represent Berlin”: a fox fur with full head, arms and legs attached. However, she describes her connection to the animal as sympathetic with its survival instinct. Small, and relatively defenseless, the fox outsmarts its predators, doubling over its own tracks in order to lose unwanted fears. The reason for taking the fox to the hospital was initially an intuitive decision, however at some point the artist recalls this undead object as representing herself. Throughout this excursion, Gobey experiments with the fur in the space, hanging it from the same chairs that once propped patients, letting its presence haunt stairwells and corridors. The traumatized remains of what once roamed as an animal now stalks the traumatized shell of a haunted site: architectures acting like bodies.

iii. un-present painting

To visually represent the traumatic event is, by nature, problematic. Isabelle Wallace outlines two conflicting psychoanalytic viewpoints on this difficult illustration. The first, a Freudian account, argues that the relationship between trauma and representation is mnemonic: “representation, precisely because it is the representation of an absent subject, is seen as a way of remembering an event whose traumatic nature mandates renewed attention.”^v As in his “Repeating, Remembering and Working Through,” Freud explains that representation *returns us to trauma*, allowing us to come to terms with the event or happening.

In contrast, Jacques Lacan explicates that there is no correlation between trauma and representation, as trauma, simply by nature, is “the very thing about which nothing can be said, written, painted or performed.”^{vi} Wallace questions the importance of actual representation when conjuring trauma in painting. Despite representation’s capacity (or incapacity) to actually illustrate the “eventless event,”^{vii} could the painting’s role be more involved with *becoming* the traumatic event itself instead of re-presenting something that cannot be defined?

However, it is painting’s inability to perfectly illustrate that mirrors the inert nature of the traumatic experience: failing to represent the event through the medium is mimetic of how one experiences trauma as both repressed and un-representable. In this way, painting becomes an apt mirroring experience for both artist and viewer. As the artist seeks to illustrate the thing they cannot find, always falling short, the viewer’s digging for concrete meaning is similarly incomplete. As art theorist, Griselda Pollock explains, trauma might be understood as “the pause in which memory forms,” as opposed to the memory itself.^{viii} This new spatial concept, that involves but does not illustrate narrative, is a similar experience to that of both making and viewing paintings: “[P]erhaps we should speak of a passage into the temporality of narrative that encases but also mutes trauma’s perpetually haunting force by means of a structuration that is delivered by representation.”^{ix}

iv. invisibility

In Gobey's recent exhibition, *The Invisible*, the artist has created a darkling pictorial space in her paintings that invites flux and impermanence. The objects and subjects—fur, masks, animals, gloves, flowers, and faces—enter the picture plane, only in-part or only to leave again, amplifying their appearance from somewhere unconscious to the artist, or, parallel to the painting's frame. This drawing-in from the outside, with no explicable reason for their collaboration, reminds us of the flickering recollection of the traumatic event, where the terrible is buried inside the guise of something more familiar.

Affectively, this is an uncanny subjectivity, one meant to unsettle, yet Gobey's tendency towards the beautiful is what keeps us from looking away. A delicate rendering fills each of the objects with a longing for completion, their indebtedness to beauty connecting the viewer more closely to the horrible: "For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror which we are barely able to endure." (Rilke) And it is this lure that attracts and forbids us to leave the psychic space, trapped inside with this phantasmagorical collection of 'dream things.'

For it was Freud who described the "uncanny" as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."^x Trauma and the uncanny experience share a similar confusion in both separating, and unifying, that which is known from unknown. As Freud explains, an etymological analysis of the word "uncanny" finds that across cultures, *heimlich* (or homely) and *unheimlich* (unhomely) can be used, one instead of the other. He ascertains that the word *heimlich* belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: "on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight."^{xi} In the same way, trauma presents itself in images, yet quickly dissolves away before any concrete representation of the actual past experience is reached. For Freud, it is the arrival of something imaginary in our reality that summons this feeling of the uncanny.^{xii}

In the case of Gobey's new work, it is beauty that coaxes her unsettled subjects out of the nighttime space. These are the frights that come to the artist when she dreams; these are those haunting visions that, when collaged together, present an un-representable experience. Artist and psychoanalyst, Bracha Ettinger, describes her attraction towards beauty in contemporary art—as a mode that carries great affective possibilities for exploring the massive effects of transitive trauma—not as a private act or consensus of taste, but as "a kind of encounter, that perhaps we are trying to avoid much more than aspiring to arrive at."^{xiii} In this case, beauty becomes a sublime weapon that leads you to your fears, before begging you to question what it was you found.

v. the negative shadow

From these reflections, I wish to consider the space created *for* and *by* trauma in painting. As Gobey recalls visions from her dreams and nightmares, she returns them to painting as a reconciliation of sorts. In repetition, they come from places in her past yet seem to recur in more present moments (as in her excursion to Beelitz). And it is in this process that we see how the traumatic motif might attach itself to an individual without giving any correct or concrete answer for its existence. In this way, it occupies a Lacanian "extimate" site, a place not in opposition to the intimate, but a psychic phenomena that defies the boundaries of the internal and external, the self and the Other: "Extimate is connected with Lacan's theory of *objet a*, which is a trace in the

psyche of that from which the subject has been cut away, like a negative shadow. It is thus the otherside of the subject, foreign and removed yet encapsulated within the psyche's most fundamental recesses."^{xiv}

And as the zone depicted moves out of *fantasy* (an imagined reality) and into *phantasy* (a psychic reality), it makes one last shift to the traumatic. Pollock argues that traumatic events transgress the limits of representation, not because of their sublime quality, but instead because their inherent atrocity is without a definable origin. She notes that although the traumatic exists outside of words and images, their affects exist everywhere. For Pollock, this marks a contemporaneous shift from an imaginary space to a real space, creating "a historically generated crisis in the relations between representation (our form of knowing) and that which having happened has none the less no immediate image or concept to represent it."^{xv} For this reason, the subjects in Janice Gobey's new work remain both present and absent in compliance with trauma's own incessant haunting.

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ⁱ Shoshona Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.179.

ⁱⁱ Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, "Introduction", *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, (Hanover, N.H. : Dartmouth College Press : University Press of New England, 2006.), p. ix.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, x.

^{iv} *Ibid*, x.

^v Isabelle Wallace, "Trauma as Representation: A Meditation on Manet and Johns", *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, (Hanover, N.H. : Dartmouth College Press : University Press of New England, 2006.), p. 3.

^{vi} *Ibid*, 3.

^{vii} Griselda Pollock, "Art/Trauma/Representation," *Parallax*, vol 15, no 1 (2009): p. 40.

^{viii} *Ibid*, 40.

^{ix} *Ibid*, 40.

^x Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 1919, pp. 1-2. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>

^{xi} *Ibid*,p.4.

^{xii} *Ibid*, p.15.

^{xiii} Bracha Ettinger, "Art as the Transport-Station of Trauma," *Artworking 1985-1999*, (Gent and Brussels: London, 2000) p. 91

^{xiv} Dana Arnold and Margaret Iverson, *Art and Thought*, (Malden; Oxford; Melbourne; Berlin: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 151

^{xv} Griselda Pollock, "Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma," *EurAmerica*, vol. 40, no. 4, December (2010): p. 835