During the Night

'At the Kunsthistorisches I feel exposed…'

Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters*[1]

It is October and the summer feels over-extended. The parks are dry and the roses have scattered. Dust clings. Some rain would help, a change in the weather, some breeze in the streets but as it is, everything seems a bit too sweet, late. There is tinny music from the café. The drinkers look dazed.

I cross the Ring, go past cars, trams, cyclists, tourists, and up the fifteen steps into the cool of the museum.

I understand this building. I think I do. The Kunstkammer is to the left, Egypt and Antiquities off to the right, galleries of paintings stretch above me, away from the operatic staircase, past Canova's sculpture of Theseus, moved from its temple in the Volksgarten where I've just come from. It is an exhortatory museum. You are helped on your way by the naming of the greats in art and philosophy, the sweep of the stairs, the storytelling in the painted ceilings, the busts. You get help. This is history and you are part of it.

So what am I doing here in this place with these collections? I have an invitation. I can choose anything I like from the Kunsthistorisches Museum or the Schatzkammer, from the collections of armour, musical instruments, or coins and medals, from Schloss Ambras, or from the library and archives. Tens of thousands of artefacts and paintings and documents, collected dynastically, obsessionally, all flowing into this building. I can go anywhere. An anonymous door leads to storerooms with shelves of things that are here because they are damaged or out of fashion or not quite as good as those on display, or reattributed, their presence not required. A note is added. I cannot have the Habsburg crown jewels or objects that are immovable – an Egyptian sarcophagus that weighs too much, a few objects in the collections at Schloss Ambras that are too delicate to travel. Can I have Titian? Or Cellini?

Of course.

All I have to do is choose and, once I have chosen, create a display.

I know some personal parameters. I know I don't want to create a Fodor's tour of these collections: I dislike the odour of masterpieces. Conversely, I think whimsy is insulting in this serious place. This is a charged place for me and I need to find my bearings, find my compass.

As soon as I have seen it, I know. It is a watercolour and description of a nightmare pasted into Dürer's *Kunstbuch*, along with engravings and drawings. When it is shown to me in the museum storeroom, I am transfixed. The project becomes possible.

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Almost five hundred years ago, Dürer woke up from a dream:

> 'In 1525, during the night between Wednesday and Thursday after Whitsuntide, I had this vision in my sleep, and saw how many great waters fell from heaven … when I awoke my whole body trembled and I could not recover for a long time … When I arose in the morning, I painted the above as I had seen it. May the Lord turn all things to the best.'

The volume of water makes the earth shake. The wind and the sound and the slowness of the deluge – the inevitability of this apocalypse is terrifying.

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[1] Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters* (London, 1985; English translation of the novel *Alte Meister,* also 1985), p.11

I follow Dürer, his line of thinking, his moment of exposure. It is his aloneness that speaks to me. He cannot control what is happening, only record what he remembers, what he sees, what he feels. This exactitude is not self-protection. It is a way of approaching what is happening when the world is unstable. During the night we are alone and vulnerable, the certainties disappear. Dürer paints and writes to see what will happen, to feel the edges of his control.

Dürer's aloneness takes me to my second object – the *Scüttelkasten*, or *shake-box*, which sits next to the vivid nightmare. When considering the *Wunderkammer,* the room of wonders, the philosopher Francis Bacon wrote of the possibility of having 'in small compass a model of universal nature made private'. Everything is possible. There should be a, 'goodly huge cabinet, wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine hath made rare in stuff, form or motion; whatsoever singularity, chance, and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsoever Nature hath wrought in things that want life and may be kept; shall be sorted and included'.[2]

This shake-box is the shuffle and tremor of things. You bring objects and the natural world together, but they move. Creatures emerge from under rocks, foliage creeps. How much control do you really have?

This unsteadiness of things is my map of the Kunstkammer. This might seem perverse. Surely room after room of golden skill speaks of dominion over the world, of collecting as power. Collecting is an attempt at mapping, a tracing of what you know. But objects and materials come back with travellers and you simply do not know what they are, whether what you hold in your hands is from an animal or a plant, what part of creation it belongs in, how old it is, what its properties might be. So in the Kunstkammer you find a nut found floating off the Seychelles, an ostrich egg, corals, a goblet crowned by precious stones. A narwhal tusk stands sentinel in the Schatzkammer as a unicorn horn.

With its strangeness, its unsettling movements, the shake-box takes me towards a world where objects have strange potencies. The fossilised sharks' teeth of the credenza are 'adder's tongues', dragons' teeth. Bezoars – the matted stone-like substances passed by mountain goats – are a protection from poison, a bastion against dangerous melancholy.

There is great power invested in these objects. Take this seriously. The love charm, just a slither of gold, carries so much aspiration in its three grams, the gemstones condense curses amongst their symbols and numbers. A tiny cube of glass contains a devil. Coral is fire made solid, the Gorgon's hair. This strange root is a crucifix.

And the handstones – strange landscapes created from minerals found deep in the mines of Bohemia – they embody this. The mine is a place of great danger. There are spirits who draw you on, places that give way under you, damp and noxious airs and gasses that make you sleep. There are seams that offer riches but are false. Here in these handstones something buried is transfigured: embedded into the rock are the steps towards the place of crucifixion, a mine working, a house. This is the landscape of anxiety, the attempt to make a safe narrative out of strangeness. I put them near Bosch's unsettling painting of Paradise.

Everything becomes a *vanitas*, a warning. But the allegories are unstable, the meanings move. So what do you do? Try and create a structure to hold them still: the bezoars are encircled with gold, the reliquaries become more and more elaborate to hold their precious fragments, tiny figures of saints are placed in handstones.

There are other changes too. Time changes. Fossilised fish speak of the Flood, 'Hereupon, the almighty father descended from the high ether in wild rage: he sends surges into the country, sending floods, and unbinds heaven to hell. He destroys the land, annihilates the farmland, the endeavour of oxen is in vain. The ditches fill up, the rivers are swelling and he condemn all domestic and wild animals to death.' We look at them like Dürer and feel we are in an end-time, sense the closeness of judgement.

And what is happening in the background becomes more significant. In the museum I have become slightly obsessed by what happens 'elsewhere' in pictures. As in the *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* in Brussels, which prompted W.H. Auden to note in his poem *Musee des Beaux Arts* how 'the expensive delicate ship that

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[2] Francis Bacon, *Gesta Grayorum*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (London, 1862), vol. 8, pp. 334-5. The *Gesta Grayorum* was a speech written for the 1594 Christmas celebrations at Gray's Inn.

must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky / Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.' And how 'everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster'.[3] I have chosen pictures where this disconnection is palpable. Look hard at these pictures.

So what makes you anxious? Fear of erasure, disappearance? Fear of the shadows? Fear of bright lights, of being searched out and exposed? Fear of the fire, of being consumed by that we cannot control? Fear of being watched? Fear of being alone? Of crowds?

I'm not sure that the shape of anxiety changes much. Here in the city of Karl Krauss and Freud and Elias Canetti, the stories settle around objects and materials of anxiety. And also images of night time, that transition into the unknown, the liminal moment when we are less defended.

So for this troubling place I make a new work.

My studio is an old factory in south London. When I moved in three years ago it was used for ammunition, for filling cartridges with gunpowder, mending shotguns. It was chaotic, stacks of wooden crates marked *explosive*, a store panelled in zinc, another for the secure storage of guns. But there was a kind of map here too, a history of where the guns and gunpowder had come from, paperwork for the hundred years for which the company had survived.

It is a vitrine, one of the largest I have attempted. And onto its nine shelves I place small silver aluminium containers that were used for the spare parts for guns. Some are filled with lead, some lead shot, some with broken pieces of porcelain. I stack small pieces of lead and I make porcelain vessels and they are glazed in black and with oxides, heavy with the minerals of alchemy. I create my own kind of *Kunstkammer* and bring this installation to the Kunsthistorisches Museum as my attempt at holding things together. It will hang alongside Dürer's night time terror, the handstones, Cranach's strange portrait of a young woman and her shadow, the reliquaries, the masks, *Orpheus and the Thracian Woman*, bezoars, gilded amulets. It will hang here for the whole winter. And I've named it *during the night*.

Edmund de Waal, London, June 2016

[3] W.H. Auden, *Musée des Beaux Arts* (December 1938), in *Another Time*, (London, 1940) p. 34