

Antonia Brown

Winged Complexion

16 November – 14 December 2024

The undoing of the plot begins when everything has been taken. When life approaches extinction, when no one will be spared, when nothing is all that is left, when she is all that is left. The undoing begins with a potion poured into a silver soup tureen before she delivers it to the table, with acts of sabotage and destruction, with idleness and destitution. The undoing of the plot begins with her drifting from the course, with an errant path, with getting lost to the world. The undoing begins with an escape to the woods, with perilous freedom, with petit maroonage, with wading in the water. [1]

The silk sculptures of Antonia Brown's 'Winged Complexion' are sites on which to re-enter historical moments where the body has been restricted through attire. They recall nineteenth-century clothing devices, such as bonnets, crinolines, head-irons, corsets and purses. Through methods of imitation, distortion and dissolution, Brown traces recent collective memory. By unfixing them from their social context, the objects transfigure toward a more malleable interpretation. Made with the intention to extend the body into beautiful, non-human forms, they inflict gestures that require inhalation of breath: clutching, cinching, binding, strapping, balancing. The sculptures not only replicate these mechanisms but gain bodily qualities themselves: costume armatures become brittle skeletons, holding stained fabrics which sag like aged skin. The outer garb amplifies corporeal

inner structures: concentric circles of the crinoline echo the shape of stacked rib bones. Winged headdresses become organly chambers, held open with striated cane. Ruched fabric drapes like sacks to catch waste residue in their folds. A ribbon unravels like a freshly snipped umbilical cord. Dislocation is felt through the transposition of the invented, external scaffolds with organic, internal systems.

Brown's practice questions the pastoral genre, inhabiting it as a way to problematise its romantic connotations. She does this most directly through her materials, colouring the silks with natural dyestuffs mixed with milky casein: Captum Mortem, English Red, Iron, Maya Blue, Burnt Umber, Oak Gall and the insect Cochineal. The forms simultaneously conjure seedlings soon to open, and fully bloomed flowers transitioning to wilt. The coiled cane used to shape many of the works reflect on cyclical patterns within nature - its gestalt drive for wholeness - whilst also nodding to recursive patterns throughout history. Since pastoral utopias aestheticise political practices of genocide, misogyny, and class and race oppression, the earthy quality of the works speak to the violence of land ownership. To subvert through pastoral, Lisa Robertson suggests, "we must become history's dystopic ghosts, inserting our inconsistencies, demands, misinterpretations, and weedy appetites into the old bolstering narratives. We shall refuse to be useful".²

There is a phantomly presence in ‘Winged Complexion’, mostly in the scratched out mirrors of *Oh red glint Glint red oh*. By scoring the backsides, the rounds sit between windows and looking glasses; a woman wearing a *hoofdijzer* appears in one like an apparition. This relationship with found imagery aids Brown’s desire to call upon her matrilineal roots, to deeper understand the conflicting states of containment and unruliness within female ancestors. Anne Carson has described these modes as *boundedness* and *unboundedness*; the latter breaking away from cognition towards an impulse to be unruly, unkempt, uncontainable.³ In a similar way, Brown thought through plants which have become invasive in Europe after their extraction and dissemination from South Africa. Through acts of unravelment, the works share this manner of deviation when encountered up close.

1 - Saidiya Hartman, *The Plot of Her Undoing*, *Feminist Art Coalition*, 2020

2 - Lisa Robertson, *Xeclogue*, *New Star Books*, 1999

3 - Ann Carson, *A Lecture on Corners*, *CUNY Graduate Center*, 10 May 2018

TEXT BY PASCALE DE GRAAF