

Encountering Approaches, Approaching Encounters in Jill Magi's 'Portable Horizons'

When Gilles Deleuze declared “I have no reserves, I have no provisions, no provisional knowledge” this was no pretence to intellectual modesty. The prolific thinker and philosopher with the dense, provocatively loaded writing style was, instead, calling for return, time and again, to a subject anew.

The tripartite layout of this essay is an attempt to heed Deleuze's invocation, a way of practicing the shedding of provisions. With a caveat – read as adjacencies, provisional knowledge will always mould our understanding – it is always an adjacent surface to encounter.

Nevertheless, the approaches followed here seek to encounter Jill's work without a slip into reserves – as such, excerpts from her poetic sequence (found to the left) and other references (to the right) are ancillary to the approach wended by the text but are essential to its unfolding. The only exception to this is word roots and etymologies – something so enfolded into the word that whether consciously or subconsciously, it is taken as a surface knowledge, never truly relegated to provisional reserve.

Advocating an abandonment of accumulated knowledge is a touch ironic for Deleuze, a man whose writings cowed the best minds, a career intellectual with a slew of citations and followers. Nevertheless, as declamatory or inefficient as this starting over may seem, it is, here, a useful place to begin.

It will be the first approach we encounter.

abandon provisions

Try to begin here. Try to acknowledge that you have no reserves, no provisions. That intellectual baggage is difficult to shed (what is that – fear? bluster? arrogance?)

I did not begin there. Eager to mine surfaces, my first approach to Jill Magi's object paintings was a leap for provenance – a bustling urge to unpack the depth in the feather, the bone, the pine cone, the pine cone, the feather, the palm frond, the bone, the pine cone, the driftwood, the bone. The approach is learnt. First to excavate origins, gather together details – I've appended it here, adding the definite articles to ascribe these objects an order of specificity that their titles do not – 'Feather, Version 1' (2016), 'Bone, Version 1' (2016–17); 'Pine Cone Version 2' (2017); 'Pine Cone, Version 1' (2016); 'Feather, Version 2' (2017); 'Palm Frond' (2017); 'Bone, Version 2' (2017); 'Pine Cone, Version 3' (2017); 'Driftwood' (2016); 'Bone, Version 3' (2016). We proceed like this, an approach learnt. Glance at the exhibition text to find the artists' intentions, settle on an echoing murmur from among

Excerpts from 'Portable Horizons: A Sequence of Poems' by Jill Magi

I number the things I do not know and wonder how to speak though I must.

This kind of linear time and the influence it has on the concept of narrative is a cultural construct, the knock-on effect being that narrative depth has varying weight.

“What use is this chronological sequence (*tasalsul al-tarikhi al-mantiqi*) upon which you all insist? Does essence change when advanced or delayed?” writes Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair as she considers 'How the Arab Understood Visual Art'.

In 'Against Narrativity', Galen Strawson stages a riposte against the motion of narrativisation, imploring “It's just not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time. There are deeply non-narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-narrative” going on to outline an alternative, episodic way of being that does not experience time as a cohesive continuum and whose sense of ownership over that experience is detached.

In 'Nausea', Sartre's Roquentin is posited as the essential 'narrative' man possessed of the inherent bias of narrative depth: “man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.”

your own references, an elegant reach to canonical concepts – and like this, braid a narrative.

There, proudly nestled in context, a cohesive whole will telescope across the cloistered spaces of House 10, Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood – feel it gather the experimental embroideries, embrace the sculptural quilts, plough furrows of close reading through the poems. Shuttle it back.

This self-reflexive action, a burrowing for narrative depth, relies on the reserves of our own knowledge as much as any quality or essence, which may or may not issue from a thing itself. We believe we penetrate surfaces and plumb depths. Instead, we mine our own references in order to meet that which is before us on our own terms. Narrative is an urge we tend to because, for many societies, a socialised experience of time is nearly always this way. We have known it since the *once upon a times* of childhood, bedtime stories of Hansel and Gretel and their trail of breadcrumbs wending through the woods, or, earlier than that, Ariadne's ball of red thread unfurled as Theseus penetrates the labyrinth.

It appears Jill has stacked and deposited provisional knowledge here – crammed in arched empty spaces are reams of anonymised books. Thoughts, knowledge and fragments become installation in 'As the city fills you with inside' (2015, 2017). Harvested from ten years of notebooks, these volumes enact a shedding and bundling of thought, the objectification of a decade of writing, thinking, time and experience bound in these deceptively non-descript containers. These stacked, crammed white covers, denying a glimpse at their contents appear like books waiting to be filled. First presented in 2015 as 'Last Book', the act of erasure, which strips the works of their cover art, omits authorial information and resists the coded vernacular of distribution, means the books simultaneously intrigue and evade as they insist upon their status as objects, as installation. Guarded gallery etiquette perhaps stops us from reaching to prise free a volume, a wry inversion of our approach to other pieces – why don't we 'read' the books, when we insist on 'reading' the works?

Beware the deception of depth

Provisions abandoned, what do we encounter? Jill speaks of these paintings as "an exercise in looking and rendering". Looking at what? At objects? Then why, try as we might, do they resist a figurative reading. They lack context. We will not find here a pine cone, *the* feather but iterations of 'feather', renderings of 'pine cone'. Absent the grounding article, these forms are jettisoned from the particularities of place or time. These paintings float in their frames – literally and conceptually – casting no shadows, the perspective planed to a flat expanse.

Not figurative then.

But if she looked and rendered, our approach must be an exercise in looking, too, looking and encountering. Denied narrative penetration, without cues, each work presents surfaces.

Here a broken binary: *If we encounter surface, we must anticipate depth.*

If narrative context implies excavation, complexity and depth, then it is easy to read a surface encounter as one of shallows, of façade. Yet, we are not talking about a surface. We are encountering *surfaces* – the work, our own and a gap between.

In the work, imagine the painter labouring at one detail at a time, focused first on this element, a square inch to the right, another crevice rendered, the work dries, a new layer applied. Like this, even a figurative rendering of *bone* becomes composed of a continuum of episodes or bundles of work. Each, taken in isolation, an abstract surface.

Considering these surfaces as if in a drawing lesson. Your gaze is directed towards negative spaces, the gaps that allow the shape of the thing to be perceived better. The empty spaces are boundaries but they are also acknowledged absences, places where, otherwise, provisional knowledge would swamp and misshape the thing itself.

These absences can instead be flooded with productive, potent potential. Approach the paintings and these familiar things in frames become more than fragments floating. Recognise feather, bone, pine cone. Acknowledge space, meet surface, too.

These are interfaces, interstices which crackle with latency. As these object drawings deny a neat path through the labyrinth of narrative depth, as they resist figurative reading, other routes open up, other dimensions abound.

Stray from the path

These dimensions are precarious. Like Hansel and Gretel in the woods, Theseus in the labyrinth, the need to narrow by constructing a linear story is a gesture of control, an urge to find a memorable path to cut through the expanse of knowledge, sign systems, things – a way through a space that sprawls infinitely. To seek narrative depth is to circumscribe – to *write around* – it sets limits and boundaries on how a thing will be encountered.

Jill circumscribes, but this is not a narrative tendency. Instead, she declares what she does not know and what she will not talk about. In the embroidered sculptures – ‘Not Speech Not Bone’ (2017); ‘Not Feather Not Father’ (2017); ‘Not Pine Cone Not Palm Frond’ (2017) a strike-through is a negation that declares the words are *not* signifiers of things but things themselves. Words – flipped, stitched, enlarged, copied, scribbled out, written. Pursue this imagined construction in reverse to decipher them, suppose that they denote what we read. Or, they denoted, *before*. Now expunged, their faces hidden, their meaning is denied, at best obscured – we cannot read words where we strive to. Or so a reach for syntactic and semantic depth would have us see, a slip into narrative which begs a beginning, a middle, an end.

This is an approach that privileges narrative depth again. Instead, approach as if meeting an object. Perhaps it is easier for us to concede when encountering ‘Not Doubt Not Force’ (2017) a cast bronze imbued with all the sculpted monumentality that the

You assess all the routes
No one comes from one.

I know nothing
about wings except
what I gladly hear of yours.

I am not speaking about maps
but a cornerstone
I trace

material signals. Here, not only a negation of word as gesture but the semantic space between two negations is a denial too, we ask: Not doubt, not force ... then ... what? and the title refuses to allow a word to emerge, refuses any meaning we might try to ascribe. Like the impenetrable might of the material it is cast from 'Not Doubt Not Force' is a strident statement of a thing existing, contained, in itself.

To imagine their production as a narrative progression, these redactions could be read as a frustrated, self-censoring or anti-poetic gesture, a striking through that obliterates the potential of word-as-prismatic signifier, the line a tight lid on a symbolic container, a barrier that denies the mining of depth once more.

Instead, this group of not-word works must be read as visual.

Arabic will help us here. *Soura*, the Arabic word meaning image or picture, possesses a nuance English does not. It is related to *taswir*, a word usually translated as 'pictorial'. *Taswir* is the process of making a *soura* – both words emanating from a root which means 'to shape' or 'to mould'. In English, the making of a picture ^(to paint) or image ^(to copy) is a process of depiction ^(painting) or description ^(writing down) – both of which imply surface as a covered depth, a surface as something discrete and separate, an imitation of the 'real thing' only, a thing that begs to be unwrapped. Instead, Arabic gives the sense of an image as a sculptural gesture that moulds, that shapes. The Lebanese modernist Saloua Raouda Choucair speaks of a *soura* as "more real than common reality" and, in so doing, she draws a distinction between the visible and the visual – the visual is *taswir*. This distinction elevates a surface, does away with a need for description, allows the *surfaces* we encounter to be things in their own right rather than things that require scene (temporality, location) or that urge to mine depth.

"Semantically, *taswir* is the process of making a *soura* (pl. *sowar*). People take *sowar* at parties and print them on the pages of society publications. A little girl who resembles her mother is her *soura*, as is a piece of paper produced by Xeroxing. This range of usages conveys the words distance from the *picture* of the Renaissance tradition... the Arabic *soura* has less to do with content than with production. The root verb *sawara* means at its most basic 'to shape' or 'to mold'."

Kirsten Scheid, 'Toward a Material Modernism – Introduction to S. R. Choucair's 'How the Arab Understood Visual Art''

Follow the gesture of elision

A line through
can also be a way to cross over.

Welcoming this visual surface, redactions take on new gestures, the strike becoming a bridge we can traverse, a way to trace a surface, a place to linger.

Linger and *surfaces* will be found again. The embroidered works proffer a 'reverse', suggesting possible encounter with at least two surfaces – we are hyperconscious of the 'right' way even when presented only with its opposite. This binary is a dual, contradictory impossibility. Physically, we can never see both surfaces concurrently yet, conceptually, we are orienting our reading of this surface through a projection of the other side. It is impossible to see and to unsee it, a tense binary that is both imagined and that cannot be. It is marked by doubling, concurrency – the suggestion of more than what we have in front of us. Jill has written of the tension that occurs when two things cannot be reconciled and the productive

The French poet Paul Valéry makes a distinction between poetic language and prose language by using the image of a plank across a ravine, a precipice where all the potential, prismatic meanings of the word threaten to overtake its efficacy. In everyday usage, we move quickly from one side to the other. In contrast, the poet does not walk on the plank, the poet lingers, the poet dances.

potential of spanning such dualities, saying, “both insider and outsider may gloss over that which they cannot reconcile – contradictions in discourse, history and experience. This, for me, is where poetry comes in, not to reconcile these different states of being, but to work with the potential that comes from recognising that both states are possible within one”. We may gloss, we may strikethrough, we may redact. In these gestures of elision – which means both ‘to omit’ and ‘to merge’ – we can recognise that two things become possible; redaction as combination, deletion as amalgamation, the formation of something new without ever needing to resort to narrative depth.

From ‘Bedouin-rooted Weaving and the Poetics of Place Making’ presented by Jill Magi at New York University Institute, March 2017

Not shallows, more than doubling, even, the potential of approaching surfaces emerges as profuse.

Adopt a soft focus

One profusion here is mediums, making it difficult to consider all the surfaces of the exhibition simultaneously without recourse to narrative exploration; a multi-genre, multi-medium profusion that refuses to cohere but instead thrives in juxtaposition and difference. This prismatic quality is exacerbated by the broken sightlines of the space’s cellular construction; unlike in a traditional white cube, we cannot see all the works at once, let alone elide the gestures of their surfaces. Approach one piece too quickly, try to view it too closely and the visual will divide or double, disintegrating into the visible, narrative, perspective skewed. Instead, try to suspend the burrowing of the zooming lens and hold a soft focus.

This dispersal of seeing is a way to approach a thing of many parts; doing away with the need for focal point that privileges one element over another. This mode of finding cohesion amongst profusion requires a modification in our own looking, an approach without a physical approach. If narrative makes a progression – either temporally or spatially – we must now be still, appreciative of the potential of adjacency and sequence. By resisting the sense that burrowing and deconstructing are the way to compose meaning, the works instead demonstrate the possibilities of modularity.

Soft focus is a term Jill used in conversation, a name for a psychoanalytic technique which she learned about from a former student. The soft focus allows the therapist to take in the patient’s whole *gestalt*

The adjacency necessary for sequence does not bind us to linearity, it is multi-dimensional, gesturing in many directions concurrently.

It does not reverse our intentions – all narratives are sequences but not all sequences are narratives.

Composed of parts, all sequences are modular.

We can embrace concurrency rather than seeking linearity.

Modularity and sequencing are predicated on surfaces, they cannot be composed of depths. When we string together a necklace we compose tonality and texture, choosing beads not according to the interior never seen. Yet that density is still its quality and dictates the order – a hollow bauble is not a pearl, yet a pearl is a thing moulded through an additive process from a grain of sand to the precious surface pearlescence. A set of nesting dolls are a

sequence and a set that appears to burrow, but theirs is a relationship which only becomes apparent unpacked, spread.

The profusion of these works makes them replete with parts conceptual and formal, here are patches of fabric, squares of paper, words as single units, thoughts, bundles of study, periods of labour, coalescing into moulded visual *things* as surfaces.

Unfold

When we relinquish the urge to burrow, to seek contexts and compositions, to deconstruct and then reconstruct a story, we compose concurrent, multifarious sequences which can expand in many directions simultaneously.

We are not mining but radiating.

This multi-dimensionality is most immediately apparent in the quilt works. Quilts do not hang flat, they are difficult to display – they ask to be draped, folded, unfolded and flipped, their presentation rails against being treated like a painting. To do so would deny their visual qualities, their malleability, the gestures of their movement, the movement of their gestures. Their creation is, unlike a painting on a canvas, a labour of turning physically and sequentially.

The *mashrabiya* found in the quilted works – ‘Madinat Zayed, Red’ (2017); ‘Madinat Zayed, Blue’ (2017); ‘Museo San Marco/Marshrabiya’ (2016–2017) – echo not with specific scenic qualities but with the modular patterns of Islamic geometry. Aniconic not narrative, on first encounter Islamic arts can be glossed as decorative, composed *only* of patterning, abstraction *à propos* nothing. Yet, the very essence of the aniconic is that what we see is the cusp of something else, a trace or suggestion of something urgent. Enfolded into visual surface *is* depth, but it is not a depth that burrows; it is immanent, indivisible and inseparable from what we see. “A continuous labyrinth is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds” writes Deleuze. Here, the line dissolving is like narrative depth, Ariadne’s red thread through the labyrinth; the fold is another line but it is a line that spans and sustains, a line that instigates multiple surfaces, a line as an articulation that introduces modularity, movement.

“Art is *aniconic* when the image shows us that what we do not see is more significant than what we do. In both Islamic art and new media art, the most important activity takes place at a level prior to the perceptible image.”

Laura Marks – ‘Enfoldment and Infinity’

Substitute here a draped quilt for a sheet of paper and unfold the enfolded intensification of visual surfaces.

Circling becomes an arrival

Focal point elided, depth enfolded, what else can be approached with our modulated vision?

The expanse between the individual and the never-obtainable, always evasive distance will not be covered – even with an infinite span of time. No matter how scenic the route we plan, regardless the stories and provisions we prepare, the horizon evades. Instead of making the journey, read and escape it as a kind of narrative depth – a temporal, spatial story that we conceive. The horizon is a distance we mould into a signifier of never-sated-longing for

skirting the idea of heritage
until my circling becomes
an arrival in itself.

another place, another time. If we can *picture* that moulding (reversing Choucair's *taswir* of *soura* / moulding of pictures), we will recognise a visual surface here, too.

And visual surfaces have the abundant potential of modularity.

Encounter 'Portable Horizons' (2017) which has all the metallic gravitas of 'Not Doubt Not Force' yet it summons and urges rearrangement – the text pieced and reordered already, opening up potential for new and repeated reshuffles. Here are horizons, these shapes spread across the floor experimentally are the release of a direction once bound entirely towards a singular focal point. These inscriptions are noted diagrammatic sentences which unpack thought and meaning. Like formulas for reading adjacencies, this concertina relaxed suggests ease, an expanse begging a sigh of shuffling and meandering realisation. A thing freed from narratives is a thing we can use in the place of narrative depth – *not* to circumscribe what we encounter with our own limited provisions, but, instead, to circumscribe in new, modular, experimental ways. *Write around* with the surfaces encountered as a means to arrange ourselves, re-orient ourselves, *to and in*.

"She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see."

Zora Neale Hurston – 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'

I opened the envelope, removed eight long slices of blue paper, arranged them as a portable horizon across the floor of the room

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