

Catalogue Essay and Selvedge Magazine Journal

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Folds: The Work of Ainsley Hillard

What might we make of this place, this haunting, something half left? An uncanny collection of traces bleached of colour, half formed echoes of the past.

In looking behind our present, over our shoulders, we turn easily to the photograph; its testimony to what was once but is no more both reassures and unsettles: here yet gone. In this place there are no photographs, no celluloid ghosts play before our eyes. Instead, we have something more material yet equally fugitive, the pressings of lace, edges of cloth, the promise of a table and the suggestion of order held in abeyance.

Here we find other things that might tell stories, offer a different way of revealing the past in the present. This dry laundry marked the final processes in the daily ritual of editing out the everyday stains of everyday life: the pressing of linen sheets, tablecloths, petticoats and shirts. Rituals practised only by laundry maids in a space that was exclusively female. This care of cloth emphasises the connection of textiles to the feminine sphere. It is tempting to romanticise such care, to speak of the splendid isolation of such things. Florie, once the Head Laundry Maid, remembered the ‘beautiful centuries old linen, crest woven fabrics, fine muslin skirts and embroidery’. She spoke with fondness of work that must have been far from easy and often very taxing. I sense, in Florie’s story, a revisiting of ‘flow state’, a way of ‘being’ occasionally discovered in the perfectly executed, rhythmic practice of repeated labour – a kind of reverie. Much is currently made of the need to work with our hands, to discover some type of ‘authentic’ labour. Here the labour of Hillard’s hand is ever-present, in her

pressing, dipping and firing, her material processes mirror those of Florie's – heat and effort at its core. Perhaps we all imagine this 'out of time' state as offering some better way of being, pleasure gained in the everyday ritual – beauty out of the daily grind.

We all know of cloth's ability to resonate memory, the body and loss. We hold onto garments that remind us of what was once real, precious even. Such things, held in our hands and to our skin, recall lives lived and gone. Like photographs, such garments can 'prick' us. Hillard is clever with this connection. She might have returned to us the objects of the laundry maid's labour, yet she avoids mimesis. Instead her vision - fractured edges, porcelain lace, and cloth pressings – emphasises what is lost from sight, how the soft and bodily thing lies beyond our grasp and how memory has its own 'edge'. In this absence, because the fully formed object remains 'off scene', we are even more aware of what is not 'here'.

It is usual to think of buildings absorbing lives, of holding secrets, of walls having ears. With these half complete things – fragments of clothing, a table that floats without edge, we might anticipate a disappearance, instead, we witness a kind of emergence; all things are dislocated: neither here nor there, but perhaps in the act of becoming.

This is no easy memorial, incomplete yet, somehow, full. Hillard offers a creative split between past and present. This gape in time, gifts us authorship, allows us to fill in the gaps. In this absence, Hillard reminds us that history is always mutable

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