

Unfolding the In-Between, Susan Roux

John Curtin Gallery, December 2020

Essay by: Nyanda Smith

UNFOLDING THE IN-BETWEEN: I–VI,

Nyanda Smith

I–VI invites the viewer to step inside a constructed realm, to enter a zone structurally demarcated by individually-placed sculptural forms. Above, a low-hanging sheath exists as a ceiling – miniscule flecks of light glinting through deep sable carbon-paper, stitched and punctured with marks and thread. From the wall, undulant corrugations of furrowed paper cascade. These spatial markers – of sky, and field – materially delineate the boundedness of this realm. Inside, one is contained within an architectural ecology; upon a stage poised for the unfolding of an as-yet unclear narrative.

At the locus of viewing – the centre of the agora – stand five forms. Comprising a line, the figures appear as a train of singular bodies, assembling together as a nebulous group. Braced upon sinewy blackened-steel frames, the mannequins of sorts are clothed – supple layers of worked paper swaddling bones, forming caverns and crests, peeling away like skins. Tiers of diaphanous bustles and petticoats evoke a soft deterioration: a return to the earth.

The skeletal structures of the forms are based on women’s garment patterns of the McDowell Garment Drafting Machine of 1879, which mechanised pattern-making using four brass pieces to measure patterns for the back, side, underarm and front sections of a garment. Rendered in steel, scale magnified and elongated, these nineteenth-century patterns are embodied.

Both materially and symbolically the figures dance between classificatory binaries, undermining singular notions of matter, durability and creative expression – subtly recasting traditions of knowledge. Rozsika Parker writes that ‘the development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft ... the art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal.’¹ Susan Roux’s figures, in spatially articulating generations of physical acts of dressmaking – measuring, tracing, cutting and stitching darts and lines – reposition hierarchically-mediated expressive practice long situated within the domain of women, and as *less than*, as foundational.

Abstract and sectioned, the forms further interrogate knowledges of Western art through employing the methodology of representing the body through parts – disembodied torsos, busts. While decultured and without physiognomy, the figures are imbued with personhood: gently adorned; animation implicit in their positions of stature; seemingly cognisant of one another as they coalesce into a line. Within the group, each form ekes out an individuated sphere of space – shadows filling in these pockets. Distillations of the human form, the forms evoke vestiges of corporeal counterparts, existing as slippages between permanence and impermanence, presence and absence, object and subjecthood.

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In-between space

A notion of passage characterises the space, which exists as a self-referential realm in which the figures appear unplaced, without origin, and oriented towards an unknown destination. It appears as a channel through which bodies move, crossing a diagonal path: the cartography of short-cuts. Unstable, it is neither here nor there.

Irit Rogoff writes, ‘cartography is the signifying practice of both location and identity, a mode of writing’.² Out-of-print maps sourced by Roux from discontinued atlases and reference books, have been used to clothe the figures; fallen-off pieces stitched together to form the ceiling work. Relics of boundaries, territories and ways of seeing, are incorporated into matter, stripped of context and meaning, performing a process of *un-mapping*.

The spatial composition points to separatory physical and psychic positioning – to the schematic power relations that inscribe and determine the placement of bodies as outside participation and belonging. Rogoff characterises these determiners, such as nation states, as those that ‘insist on a singular spatial inhabitation under one dominant rule’.³

I-VI gestures to the diasporic paths forged daily by bodies across geopolitical territories and borders; to the commonality and currency of the human pursuit to seek refuge, safety, *home*; to the paths that demarcate and define identities. This marginal space by its very definition sits outside dominant rule. Victor Turner’s ‘liminality’, rooted in the Latin *limen* (‘threshold’), refers to phases of transition and passage that sit outside social structures.⁴

Rosi Braidotti similarly describes ‘in-between’ zones as operating as spaces dislocated from hegemony, describing them as ‘where all ties are suspended and time stretched to a sort of continuous present. Oases of nonbelonging, spaces of detachment. A no(wo)man’s land’.⁵

Positioned outside structural order, such zones provide room for transformative agency. Turner writes that liminal states, as ambiguous and disorientating, are inherently ‘anti-structure’, causing rupture and change. Homi Bhaba similarly posits in-between space as providing room for new negotiations, behaving as: ‘terrain(s) for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity ... in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference ... nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated’.⁶

In-between, liminal space thus can be seen as performing a double-action through destabilisation, both taking away and producing. Space that marginalises also undoes order.

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The line

Unifying the works in *I–VI* is the line – a foundational methodology within Roux’s practice. Sculptural works are conceived of as drawing upon material, ‘exploring the limits of drawing’⁷. Paper – drawing, carbon-pigmented, and maps – is stitched with military-grade Kevlar thread – a fibre of combat zones. The paper has the armour of battle worked through: simultaneously strengthening and undoing. Lines formed by stitch, tracing wheel and steel brush, inscribe and transmute the material.

Deleuze writes that ‘whether we are individuals or groups, we are made up of lines’¹, proposing that three threads construct human ‘lifelines’: molar lines, molecular lines, and rupture lines. Each lifeline works to discursively produce human existence through boundaries (molar); chaos (rupture) and a fusing of the two (molecular).⁸

Roux’s use of the line can be seen to converse with all three Deluezean lifelines. Formed through processes of ‘blind drawing’⁹, her lines demarcate boundaries that are non-linear, expansive and permeable. Once forged, the line is re-worked and re-worked to fuse with others – so that in the end no separation exists. This making and un-making of boundaries aligns with Luis de Miranda’s description of the double-action of the line as the fold: ‘repetition is what restricts, being the ... criss-crossing of the same fold, but also what sets free, being a resistance, bringing into being that which does not yet exist’.¹⁰

Rogoff raises ‘the question of location for belonging’,¹¹ which Roux can be seen to answer with *I–VI*. As described by Roux, the human pursuit ‘to fit’¹², or as Braidotti proposes, ‘processes of becoming’¹³ – rest on far more than geography, beyond a binary of ‘emplacement and displacement’.¹⁴

As spectators within this in-between, liminal space, Roux asks us to consider questions of location, subjectivity, self and collective identity. Her vision is neither dystopic or utopic – the figures we encounter are neither emplaced or displaced. Instead, they articulate a position of slippage, of plurality.

Rogoff proposes a dismantling of hegemonic structures through the ‘multi-inhabitation of spaces through bodies, social relations and psychic dynamics’, to provide a ‘dialectical system in which opposing claims can be positioned in a relation to one another which is not conflictual.’¹⁵

Through providing a third zone where discursive production is open-ended rather than containing; we are given a moment – cohabitating with these silent forms enacting their own processes of becoming – to think through what this might look like, to imagine which does not yet exist.

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Endnotes

¹ Parker, R. (2010), *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, I.B. Tauris, London. p. 5.

² Rogoff, I. (2000), *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*, Routledge: New York. p. 73.

³ Rogoff, I. Ibid. p. 23.

⁴ Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

⁵ Braidotti, R. (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 18.

⁶ Bhabha, H. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. p. 3.

⁷ Roux, S. (2020). Interview with artist, December 2020.

⁸ Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2004). *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, London: Continuum. p. 221.

⁹ Roux, S. Ibid.

¹⁰ De Miranda, L (2013). 'Is a New Life Possible? Deleuze and the Lines'. *Deleuze Studies* 7.1, p. 139.

¹¹ Rogoff, I. (2000), *ibid.* p. 23.

¹² Roux, S. (2020), 'Artist Statement I-VI', John Stringer Prize 2020, John Curtin Gallery, Bentley.

¹³ Braidotti, R. (2014), 'Writing as a Nomadic Subject', *Comparative Critical Studies* (11.2). p. 163.

¹⁴ Rogoff, I. Ibid. p. 9.

¹⁵ Rogoff, I. Ibid. p. 23.