

# Locating the Self, Welcoming the Other

## In British and Irish Art, 1990-2020

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**Excerpt :** Chapter 3 Transitional objects: Collecting, recollecting, reconnecting

In several works by Cornelia Parker and other younger artists, dust is used to evidence of the passage of time. As homage to Man Ray, Parker entitled a work she was commissioned by the Chinati Foundation as a response to Donald Judd's sculptures *Dust Breeding* (2001). She collected the dust from Judd's stainless sculptures, magnified it and found it was teeming with bugs, which she then photographed in close-up. Her work wittingly contrasted with the revered minimal sculptures and their pure, sleek shapes. Refusing the cold geometry of minimalism, Parker put to the fore the invisible creatures breeding on the residue of art, what is normally eliminated and ignored. Dust stands for the overlooked, the neglected, the discarded and testifies to the passage of time; "dust is the material of absence."<sup>1</sup> "Dust negates nothingness. It is here, tenacious and aerial, impossible to eradicate completely, pervasive to the point of triggering anguish, breathlessness. It is the indestructible froth of destruction," Georges Didi-Huberman notes.<sup>2</sup> "A material hailing from afar –from what is weathered, past, mouldy–, it contaminates our present space, creating a residual air so to say. A veil of impurity."<sup>3</sup> Dust is therefore the transformation of time into material, the trace of past activity and movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Génie du non-lieu, air, poussière, empreinte, hantise* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2001), 55.

<sup>2</sup> My translation, *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> My translation, *Ibid.*, 55.

Dust is Laura Blight's favourite material, one that she connects to Man Ray's *Breeding Dust* (a work itself related to Duchamp) and Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection.<sup>4</sup> She first became aware of the potency of dust as embodied memory when seeing an old spice cabinet in the house of a friend, painter Penny Berry Paterson: "It looked as if it hadn't been dusted since the 1990's" she reminisces. "The out of date spices were covered in thick layers of dust which had moulded and nestled themselves into the edges and groves of the wooden cabinet. I was captivated," Blight explains, "by the delicateness and intricacy of this material draped across rows of timeworn spice boxes. Almost like a palimpsest that is continually being written over when new layers of dust form, just like our memory."<sup>5</sup> In her work, dust is both a material to be worked with and a multi-layered symbol. In 2018 she installed *Dust Bath Concept*, an immaculate and elegant white bathroom overflowing with grey dust spilling over from the tub. By substituting dust to the cleansing water she inverted the normal hierarchy of materials imposing an abject filthiness in the pure sanitized realm of the bathroom itself an image of our disciplined body.

In Blight's works, dust is not static but proliferates as if out of control. Such uncanny mushrooming evokes the return of the repressed, the impossibility to eradicate the id in Freudian parlance. The artist quotes anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis who argues that "dust is the perceptual waste material formed by the historical-cultural repression of sensory experience and memory. It is also the form that residual culture takes once it is compartmentalized as the archaic and sundered from any contemporary pertinence and presence".<sup>6</sup> Blight sees dust as symbolising "the psychological burden that lives under our skin in the form of repression".<sup>7</sup> The vitality of dust in her works echoes that of recycled materials in Phyllida Barlow's installations. For *Dust cave* (2018) Blight collected dust which she placed in the abandoned interior of a caravan invaded by vegetation. "The process of sourcing, collecting and assembling the

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<sup>4</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

<sup>5</sup> Unpublished interview (October 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Unpublished interview (October 2020).

material became a personal ritual connecting me to the mystery of past events. The dust I have collected serves as a language to communicate nebulous levels of reality that are not directly accessible to us,” she explains.<sup>8</sup> Again dust is like an organic substance multiplying, thriving and propagating inside a domestic space.

In *In the Beginning, and Without End* (2018<sup>9</sup>) a set of photographs showing dust being swept away in an unfurnished room, dust stubbornly persists and accumulates taking the shape of ghostly sculptures or vaporous clouds. The work registers the process of sweeping, an ordinary gesture required for the maintenance of one’s home. An unusual material in sculpture, dust visibly interacts with space and people’s movements thereby making visible otherwise invisible interactions between humans and matter. “The true essence of all that we see, hear, touch, taste and smell is made up of an invisible substance that permeates everything there is – including our own physical bodies,” Blight comments.<sup>10</sup> In her influential book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), anthropologist Mary Douglas showed that dirt was a taboo reflecting deeply embedded cultural values. When the occupant fails to order space and keep the house clean, dirt or dust pollutes the home and threatens to contaminate space. “Dust offends the senses. It is the loss of the home to otherness,” Seremetakis argues<sup>11</sup>. This symbolical system can extend to larger spaces. In Blight’s images of dust being displaced from one corner to the next, one may see a metaphor for people being rejected, relegated to the margins and denied visibility.

Such interaction is illustrated in *Residue Studies* (2019), photographic close-ups of hand-made paper works incorporating domestic dust collected from various places (including her family house) and digital images of skin by Lucas Gabellini Fava. The wrinkled paper and the imperfections of its texture reinforce the spectrality of the dust particles, grafting time onto the metaphorical aging body. The porosity of time and that of our skin, an interface or contact zone between self and other are joined.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The title is excerpted from Julia Kristeva’s essay.

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished interview (october 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Seremetakis, *The Senses Still*, 36.

In *House Clearances* (2010), a series of colour photographs taken in unoccupied houses, dust is almost invisible despite traces of interrupted occupation. Thanks to the connections Blight had established with the Essex local council she was allowed to visit the former properties of elderly people. “I photographed objects and furniture exactly as they had been left behind, uninterrupted. For me, this was important because I was trying to capture a sense of liminal space, one that is in between habitual use, a state of transition,” she notes.<sup>12</sup> The camera focuses on the faded colours of the walls or carpets, on the few outmoded pieces of furniture left behind, the curios on a cupboard. “I enjoyed observing clusters of objects and trinkets, imagining stories in my head of how the objects ended up there,” she remembers.<sup>13</sup> The rooms are in a suspended time but still harbour untold stories. An impression of silence and stillness prevails in images showing beds without sheets, chairs and armchairs unoccupied. The houses were left tidy and ordered as if providing the last image of their occupants, they are like death masks. It is a similar overlap of presence and absence which fascinates dereliction photographers.

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<sup>12</sup> Unpublished interview (october 2020).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*