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Fragrant portals, dimly starred

Mary O'Halloran

*It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.¹*

'The Idea of Order at Key West' 34 - 44

As a child, I sometimes accompanied my grandmother to Sunday Mass in a small Catholic church in West Limerick, where the pungency of liberally dispensed incense seemed to claw at the tissue of my nasal cavity. Flanking the altar was a crudely rendered figure of Jesus with the errant serpent, eyes bulging, straining vainly for breath beneath his sandaled foot. Elsewhere, the same feet appeared twisted and hobbled in a sculptural depiction of the traditional crucifixion scene, overlapping, punctured and coursing with blood rendered in the crudest of poster paint reds. Here, my rapt eyes would dart feverishly from one image to the other, the first so redolent with vanquishing power, the other so utterly visceral and immiserated. Back and forth, again and again, melding, fusing, coalescing. Intermingling with the fumes of incense until all sound was obviated and the walls of the building disintegrated, toppling to the ground.

Childhood functions, in retrospect, as a hermetically sealed state of absolute subjectivity, the force of which wields an unparalleled power to shape and distort exterior reality. Indeed, it is this very transformative plasticity of the unlettered mind that we as adults seek endlessly to circle back to, an almost preternatural psychedelic state that allows the imaginer to become 'the single artificer of the world' (37). The result may be order or chaos; in the case of Stevens, an atheist grappling for a unifying meaning in a post-Nietzschean era, the creative impulse strove to master and compartmentalise reality, to make the big, secular world digestible and habitable. In *A Memory Circular*, Proffitt inverts Stevens' logic and instead embraces, and actively seeks to reinstate, the bending of reality when acted upon by the singularly subjective and infantile mind.

Proffitt's practice may best be described as evincing a preoccupation with the interspersal of the esoteric, the phenomenological and the darkly fantastical amid the everyday, and often

¹ Stevens, Wallace. "The Idea of Order at Key West." *The New Anthology of American Poetry Volume Two: Modernisms 1900-1950*. Ed. Steven Gould Axelrod et al. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007. 163-65.

unremarkable, artifacts of childhood and adolescent experience. This creation of a third place, the cultivation of a third eye, develops, in the paintings of *A Memory Circular*, into an arena in which both the conflict and ultimate coalescence of these extremities is enacted.

In *I wrote my name backwards on a tree and the sky filled with blood* we observe the ritual performed, as the diabolical connotations of the inverted lettering of the title seem to conjure a cataclysm in the sky. Here, the mutilation of the natural serves to cast the creative process as a godlike vehicle towards the subversion of objective reality, itself a power so profound that it becomes almost heretical in its execution. Against a melting, almost bleeding backdrop, this cosmic interface of the everyday and the phantasmagorical is explored; the wholesome domesticity of buildings, chimneys and broccoli-esque trees sharing space with flaming globules, phantom cacti and a wailing homunculus.

This celebration of disorientation, of the psychedelic-ism of childhood experience recaptured by the creative process, peppers, and in many ways defines, the body of work. *come together* revisits Proffitt's use of the image of the birthday cake, here evoking the tobacco infused scents of the 1980's family dining room, with its gaudily sprayed candles and ornate cake stand. Again, this most commonplace of familial items undergoes a process of purposeful disassociation, levitating amidst swirls, vortexes and skeletal faces emerging and retreating forebodingly from enveloping darkness. In doing so, it points and indeed urges us toward the disorder of our origins; the instinctual, the childlike, the forgotten, the profane, the psychedelic.

Over the last two years, Proffitt has focused his practice almost entirely on painting and, in doing so, has ostensibly arrived at a point of transition from prior, predominantly large scale, installation work. The notion of complete divergence, however, would seem to be in error. Rendered on found pieces of untamed, irregularly cut wood, the paintings of *A Memory Circular* retain, and even augment, the preoccupations characteristic of previous installation work (the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the mystic, the ritualistic cohabitating with rubbish). Indeed, the shard-like totem of *summer séance* seems as though plucked from one of Proffitt's dilapidated shrines and reinvigorated through this very act of recontextualisation. *we kept our fires burning* harkens back to a longstanding captivation with the spaghetti western and the genre's 'Acid-ification' in the films of Alejandro Jodorowsky. In many ways, however, the work diverges by moving more nakedly towards a complete immersion in the transcendent. *loner*, while perhaps recalling the crudely painted sculptures and altarpieces of the rural church, seems more overtly to call forth the ancient, enigmatic spectre of The Pythia, abandoned to a vapour-induced higher consciousness and lost in the absolute interiority of her oracular visions.

At the conclusion of *The Idea of Order at Key West*, Stevens entreats the reader to reject fascistic drives for order and advocates instead that we attribute meaning, in our godless world, through the exercise of creativity. These 'fragrant portals', though subjective and 'dimly starred' are, for him, the only true path to meaning, to the roots of 'ourselves and our origins' (53). In the paintings of *A Memory Circular*, Proffitt seems to confront us with the self-same plea, to return, in the application of complete subjectivity, to the hollowed, primal space where all levels of knowing, feeling and experience are accessible.

'In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds' (55)