

The Way of all Flesh

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There was a rare snowfall in Florence in the winter of 1494. The new ruler of the city, Piero de' Medici, ordered the young Michelangelo, a great favourite with his predecessor, to go out into the courtyard and sculpt him a snowman. This, the now famous story of one of art history's most unusual commissions, is commonly cited as an example of a patron's abuse: the young sculptor's talent, it is often considered, was completely wasted on an ephemeral piece. And yet Michelangelo's snowman was said by his contemporaries to have been a fabulous creation. It lives on in art history, glittering in the memory as among this master's finest works.

When we think of great sculpture we tend naturally to think of the strong, the solid and the lasting: of the vast funerary monuments built by the Egyptians, of the great frieze carvings of Assyrian reliefs, of the marmoreal images sculpted by the Greeks and the Romans, of the spectacular bronzes which Renaissance masters cast. Even paintings, from the frescoes in which images are embedded into the very fabric of a building to the portraits that preserve the living look of their subjects across the centuries, are concerned with long term survival. Art traditionally makes a stand against time's ebb and flow.

And yet, in the long run, it always fails. It goes the way of all flesh. Even the pharaohs' great sphinxes have let the treasures that they were first set to guard slip through their stone paws, while the Egyptian kings who sought everlasting life have ended up as little more than freak-show performers for package-holiday tourists.

Little wonder that the modern world, faced with so many examples of such manifest

failure, has turned away from long vistas of the future and instead of expressing its love for the ephemeral by trying to preserve it, has decided to participate in that very ephemerality. With the rise of the conceptual in the wake of the pioneering Marcel Duchamp, the classical definition of art as an object began to break down. Ideas came to be valued over finished products. Over the course of the postwar decades, visual culture came to incorporate pretty much anything from discarded junk, through fat, fur and felt, to dead animals and faeces. The art object, it was recognized, is essentially perishable. It will eventually return to its natural state. Jean Tinguely demonstrated this clearly when in 1960 he created his *Gizmo* – an artistic snarl of scrap metal, driven by a motor with a transmission belt. With time the little hammers in the mechanism knocked holes in its structures, the chassis collapsed, the wheels stopped turning and the belts went slack. Tinguely created an art work which manifested its own fragility: an automaton that by performing the functions which defined its very existence would eventually destroy itself. He accepted a fundamental fact: that life has to live even if it ends in death.

It is this elementary truth which this new exhibition at La Casa Encendida celebrates. Taking the ephemerality of art as a theme, an international group of contributors create a series of site-specific installations that focus on art's essential transience.

These are not pieces that set out to still an image for posterity. Rather, they open our eyes to the magic of the passing moment, to the poetry of the present as it changes and shifts. The Scottish artist, Andy Goldsworthy, for instance, presents a conceptual equivalent of Michelangelo's sculpted snowman. Just as the great Renaissance master moulded the human form from a substance that he knew would melt, so Goldsworthy discovers an image of human fragility in the shapes which a person makes as he lies down upon a pavement in the rain. The silhouette which he leaves vanishes as the water evaporates from the surrounding stone. Art is as ephemeral as life, Goldsworthy suggests.

An art work is no longer seen necessarily as a solid monument. It can take the form of an intervention so slight that it becomes immaterial. Martin Creed presents his *Work No. 227*, a flickering installation in which the lights in the gallery are switched on and off at regular intervals. When Creed was awarded the Turner Prize for this piece in 2001, half the visitors fell in love with the idea, while the other half was appalled. Was it dodgy electrics or ground breaking aesthetics; wool pulling swizz or subversive wit? Were they bearing witness to visual revolution or a wilful obscuration? Opinions flickered like the lights. No consensus was reached. Art resists such categories. Its labels can no longer be so clearly fixed.

Tino Sehgal insists that there should be no printed manuals of instruction, no catalogue entries or visual records of his performances. They are essentially transient pieces. His *This is Exchange*, in which in return for one euro a gallery guard will ask visitors to speak about the Spanish economy, constructs not an object but a situation. It presents art in the form of an un-reproducible experience. It is the moment that matters, not the monument. Life cannot be trapped. Creation is a process not an end product, concurs Eloise Fornieles, as she invites visitors to scramble up into a gently swinging boat which, suspended between earth and sky, rocks back and forth to the resonant sound of the wind: a metaphor for life's endless flux.

The journey is more important than the destination; the present experience more meaningful than the hindsight of posterity. The art work is constantly evolving in the work of Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger, who create a conference room, complete with all the accoutrements of office life, over which slowly accreting crystals will crawl and spread, spiky chemical flowers gradually overtaking and transforming this modern day scenario, like forest plants clambering over some abandoned temple. Meanwhile, the Swiss artist Roman Signer puts all the strict planning and controlled execution of a quasi-

scientific procedure to the presentation of a split second of explosion or collision. The aesthetic moment in all its beauty and wonder is essentially vulnerable. It cannot last.

It is no coincidence that several of the installations in this show allude to music, that most intangible of art forms. A musical score is a changeable set of instructions, explains Gregorio Zanon, whose improvised performances at the piano celebrate the ever-shifting possibilities of an infinitely variable art, while Céleste Boursier-Mougenot makes a piece which involves a flock of finches alighting on the fret boards of a guitar. The visual is translated into the audible, the living creature into an abstract noise.

No state can ever be fixed. Life and death are both part of the same circle. The Irish born artist Claire Morgan makes this plain in a sculpture that combines the vivid ripeness of red fruit with the blackness of a falling bird. Michael Blazy takes living organisms as his medium as he creates a space in which the spectator is invited to focus on the beetles that burrow through a series of baguette sticks. Destruction becomes a creative impulse. As a block of ice stained with ink installed by Kitty Kraus melts it produces something new. The building block of modernism, the geometrical shape, dissolves into dark patterns that seep out and stain the gallery floor. Decay is an aesthetic force, posits Anya Gallaccio. Her gleaming slabs of chocolate, breathing their tempting aromas out into the atmosphere, slowly curdle and mould. Nothing lasts forever except the endless ongoing processes of transformation, is the message as she suspends rings of burning candles above the ground. Their molten wax drips, creating circular patterns, time-honoured symbols of perpetual return.

And when the art work has gone all that is left is the traces that remain in our minds. Chiharu Shiota's piano stands silent amid its semicircle of empty chairs; deprived of its musical purpose, its meaning slips away, leaving only a cobweb of memories. Shiota makes this visible in her network of dark threads. Yet these memories have an

eloquence that parallels that of the original performance. They become art works in their own right, stirring feelings as powerful, as vivid, as evocative as the original work that gave rise to them. Like Michelangelo's evanescent snowman, they glimmer all the brighter for the fact that they cannot be fixed.

“on&on” is an exhibition that speaks to a digital age in which experience is too often treated as if it was everlasting, as if its knowledge can be recorded forever in binary digits, as invisible and inextinguishable as the God in which the modern world has increasingly ceased to believe. This is a show that reaffirms the importance of the aesthetic experience. What we hold inside our heads – our memories, our emotions, our perceptions of our own sense of history, our imaginings about what we might become, what hopes and possibilities we might fulfil – becomes all the more cherished. The ongoing, ever-shifting experience which art can offer is precious. It speaks of that which is quintessentially human; that which is utterly unique.