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DAVID AUSTEN THE DROWNED

MATT'S GALLERY
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Hisham Matar

Memory and Consequence in David Austen's *The Drowned*

A naked man stands alone. He is looking down toward his penis, either regretful or reflecting on something important. In the other picture, a woman and child, both also naked, stand side by side holding hands. She too seems to be casting her mind back. The child looks to be new to walking, still learning to be upright. They all appear to be at the end of things, concerned with history and shame. Perhaps they are thinking about what had just occurred, but also what might come next. After all, shame is always about the future.

It is as though they are inside one of those dreams where, having set off on a particular course of action, it is impossible to turn back. But they don't look dispossessed of will. They proceed with their doubts. They are standing at the midpoint between action and consequence. And yet they seem, both as protagonists and as drawings, to have come about in an instant. One is aware both of the frailty of their mortality – its need and passions – and of them having been drawn in a succession of strokes. In other words, I wonder to what extent these watercolours are interested in the relationship between the economical artistic gesture and the integrity of human life.

These two pictures are part of a series named *The Drowned*, a large collection of figurative watercolours by the English artist David Austen. They are drawn on paper that is the size of a photograph or a book, small enough to fit into a pocket. Together they form a powerful and savagely intimate catalogue. They depict usually one or two figures placed at the centre of the frame, surrounded by emptiness. Each figure looks stained in space, as though burnt there, caught in the act, lonesome and yet, judging by their form – its guilt and wonder, its desire and hesitancy – one is conscious of them being related to other people, enmeshed in cause and effect.

There is a vague but persistent suggestion that they stand accused, as though they are Adam and Eve but many centuries later, when neither can remember the fall. Their solitude is relentless, which is maybe why their need for physical pleasure, particularly sex, is so acute and has the basic thirst for water. If they are free, then theirs is the freedom of nature: neither hypothetical nor contingent. They are certainly not in search of consensus. Rebellion is not part of the equation nor, for that matter, is the need for an appeal.

Behind Austen's work there is a rich and varied genealogy. Like Alberto Giacometti's figures, Austen's too seem to be caught in the aftermath. But whereas the Swiss sculptor's personalities are existentially alone, Austen's are both singular and implicated in the lives of others.

Also clear here is Austen's abiding interest in the Thinite ancient Egyptian figures: small, ivory miniatures that could fit in the palm of your hand. There is something of their intimacy, their constraint and vulnerability, their interest in frailty and decay that is in *The Drowned*.

The Fayum Portraits are also evoked: the futile attempt to retain the dead, but also the uncomplicated and common place nature of these

characters, the way they seem to stand for others and to have been drawn – as in the case of the Fayum Portraits – to remind and console the living.

There is also in the background the fresco *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, by the Florentine Early Renaissance painter Masaccio, which depicts Adam and Eve weeping inconsolably as they walk into their exile. The couple's fall is connected to Austen's figures and might offer another interpretation – beside that of death – of what *The Drowned* have been submerged into: earthly life.

In their bookishness and taste for the absurd, *The Drowned* also bring to mind Goya's etchings of the horrible and the grotesque, which he made in the late 18th century in response to the pandemic of abuse and superstition in that age of revolution and terror. Like Goya, Austen is relentless. And the work is made more severe by its intimate quality, as though one is meant to look at these watercolours whilst lying in bed.

A less obvious parallel, but perhaps one more intriguing to think about, is that between the work of David Austen and the music of the British composer Harrison Birtwistle. Both are interested in the resonance of the primordial onto the present; both are fascinated by the elemental, by melancholia and humour; and both are warmly unaffected and direct.

So as with the narrative life of its figures, the body of work that is *The Drowned* too arises from a history and is looking ahead. It is deeply invested in the question of how, after all that has happened, one might attend to the corporeal.

Austen's interest in watercolour – or, as he prefers to call it, 'coloured water' (placing the emphasis on water rather than colour) – is due in part to the medium's ephemeral and weightless quality. He is interested in its relationship to light, its transparency and evocation of the impermanent state. It is, to him, a form close to photography: in its instantaneousness as well as its reluctance and tenacity at being fixed on paper.

'A watercolour is like a breath,' he says. 'And you hold your breath as you make one. Otherwise it wouldn't be accurate.'

I find the word 'accurate' here interesting. It suggests he is copying or responding in some way to an original. And apparently this is how it is: these figures occur to him and he holds them in mind until he can transfer them on to paper. Those that work are successful because an accurate contact between his imagination and the paper was possible.

'I wonder if this is why they seem to be facing home,' I tell him. 'As though held in limbo or caught in a moment of recognition. In other words,' I continue, 'they too seem to be thinking about memory, about the desperate need to recollect accurately.'

'Yes,' he says slowly and falls silent. He appears to be casting his mind back. And then, just when I think he is about to say something, he holds his tongue.

I don't ask any more questions. I suspect he too believes that the only authority on the work is the work itself. I return to the watercolours, to their wicked playfulness, their burnt and stained nature. They are free from the burden of needing to account for themselves.

London, 4 January 2018

