

Death Becomes Her

“Nature may be understood not as an origin or as an invariable template but as materiality in its most general sense, as destination.”

Elizabeth Grosz in ‘Volatile Bodies’

Catherine Evans explores the human and animal bodies through subtle, yet powerful means. The works on display in Swan Song invoke thoughts and sensations that traverse the spectrum from life to death; beauty, life, love, nature, environment, shelter, protection, family, habitat and death. Evans’ considered use of materials (among others plaster, glass, sea grass and a taxidermied swan) imbues the installation with what Grosz names as “the primacy of corporeality”. Through this embodied materiality, the synaesthetic experience of the work is palpable.

Philosophers have long linked art with sexuality. Evans’ deployment of video, sculpture, photography and installation imparts an immersive experience for the viewer, rendered powerfully present through the artist’s affinity with nature and desire. Her naked body entwined with the curving form of the swan, their two necks in synchronistic accord and the white wing of the swan echoed in the pubic triangle all evoke a feminine sensuality. The artist herself described the experience of dancing with the swan as beautiful. But desire is tempered here by the presence of death, presented in these works through the preserved body of the four year old female swan and then repeated in the video work of the artist performing a dance with the deceased bird.

The softness and fluidity of the artist/swan in the video piece strikes a protective pose, the merging of their bodies evoking a mother and child. For she is indeed a she, recalling a siren’s watery lament, bearing witness through the gesture of holding. The framed image of a neck photographed with a large format camera discloses the intertwining of Evans’ conceptual and material processes. Representing not only its necessary physical operations, this conduit invokes the dualisms of body/ mind and nature/science, which encircle these works. The installation of the glass and plaster architectural forms complete the artists’ coherent articulation of these interrelationships.

Within a resurgence of animism in visual art and popular culture, it is not a fantasy that Evans is recreating, nor aspiring for in an escapist fashion. Rather the artist is revealing to us a real truth, a mourning for that which is fragile and vulnerable, exposing the implications for us all if we continue to stick our heads in the sand.

Caroline Phillips is an artist, curator and writer.