One Way or Another

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Don't look now. Or go ahead, look if you like, with your full and concentrated attention. Let your mind roam across far-flung places; attend, fiercely, to the here and now. Prepare yourself to receive a message loud and clear, a voice of protest uplifted. Glimpse the merest suggestion of a suggestion, so oblique that it could easily escape notice. Dig in deep. Add it all up. Wonder how. Find out.

These are some of the possible responses to *One Way or the Other*, by no means exclusive of one another. I recommend you do it all, exploring this inspired pairing of artists in its full dimensions. They have much in common, but not as much as one might initially think; theirs is not quite a meeting of the minds, but rather something more complex, layered, and meaningful. Something, come to think of it, a lot like friendship.

Back to the beginning, then: to the moment, over twenty years ago now, when Paul Scott and Caroline Slotte met at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design in Norway. He was teaching there, visiting regularly from his home base in Cumbria. She was studying for her MA, which she received in 2003, before returning to Finland. Within a few years of this encounter, their work had converged on a related set of tactics. Mutual influence may have had something to do with it.

Scott had long been printing on found ceramics, beginning with bone china seconds manufactured by companies like Spode and Royal Worcester. It was only in 2001, though, that he started making interventions on transferware, overlaying and disrupting its existing imagery with additions of his own. This work immediately stood out in the field of contemporary ceramics, both for its idiosyncratic methodology and for its trenchant iconography. His signature move was – and remains – the transformation of conventional objects into progressive political statements. (As sourcing antique wares has become more difficult, he has also created slipcast blanks for use as substrates.) The topics he has taken up are many and varied, but have in common a deeply held anti-authoritarianism.

This being the case, it is no surprise that the Trump era, parts 1 and 2, has witnessed some of his most incandescently outraged works. Scott has adopted the phrase "the sleep of reason," borrowed from the satirical *caprichos* of Francisco Goya, as an apt descriptor of this period in history. In one plate from his *New American Scenery* series,

subtitled "A Souvenir of Los Angeles," a raging wildfire licks upward from the ornamental rim. Another, "A Souvenir of Portland," made shortly after the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, irresistibly recalls Breughel's painting *The Blind Leading the Blind*. Nine soldiers proceed in silhouette against a fog of tear gas, making their way from a White Man Statue to the Chamber of Commerce.

So forceful, so unforgettable are these images that Scott's subtlety may initially escape notice. There is always a sleight of hand to his seamlessly sutured compositions, an enigmatic quality that dispels any sense of didacticism. Consider, for instance, his *Broken Treaties* plate featuring a Native American mounted on horseback. The figure is much like those in paintings of the late nineteenth century, which took for granted the inevitable disappearance of the Indians – they were often literally depicted looking at a sunset. Scott turns this baleful pictorial idea inside out. His Native rider – taken from a striking photograph showing the Lakota "water protector" Mega Mae Plenty Chief in a protest at Standing Rock, South Dakota – seems the only stable, sane thing in view. She and her surroundings are set at a vertiginous angle with the plate's original decoration, which is one of those sententious scenes of white people supposedly trying to make peace with Native leaders – in this case, a conference between President William Henry Harrison and the Shawnee chieftain Tecumseh.

On the plate's reverse, crisscrossing lines of text provide information about both of these primary sources, along with a great deal else: the title of the plate and the larger series; a quotation from the *Guardian* newspaper (repeated three times, at different type sizes); insignia representing Wedgwood, the V&A, and Ferrin Contemporary; and finally, several of Scott's own personal emblems. A couple of these elements are original to the object, most aren't, and distinguishing which is which takes a bit of work. Like the front of the plate, but even more explicitly, Scott's *verso* palimpsests invite a parsing of overlapping, conflicting narratives.

At first glance, Scott's loquacity would seem to find its absolute opposite in Slotte's reticence. To call her works understated is itself an understatement. She is a poet of silences, an artist who works principally in the medium of negative space. His works are hyper-legible, inviting and even challenging the viewer to learn about stories that have been wrongly effaced. Slotte, by contrast, says, "I know a work is good if I make something and I don't really understand it. For me the best would be if it were never readable."

This difference in outlook plays out in Slotte's preferred methods. While she begins with the same transferware ceramics as Scott does, instead of adding imagery, she instead makes deft removals that utterly transform their meaning. Her early *Landscape Multiples*, for example, consist of plates of graduated sizes, stacked up as if awaiting use in a cupboard. Every plate except for the bottom one has a precise hole cut into it, yielding a tunnel-like view down through the stack. The delicate, intricately contoured edges are visible, as fragile as a book's pages.

Still more haunting is Slotte's series *Going Blank Again*, in which she uses a small drill to systematically remove all the blue from an old piece's surface. The blank background now stands proud, its aged color different in tone from the exposed bone-white clay body. On one level, these works speak to the partial and elusive nature of collective memory – which might be defined as that which is left behind, when all else is forgotten. Yet Slotte's painstaking act of erasure can also be read as deeply personal. The title *Going Blank Again* is a short story in three words, which strikes right to the heart of anyone who's ever been at a loss. And who hasn't?

Slotte brings this same quiet intensity to all her work. Sometimes she leaves just one motif intact – a patch of sky, a fishing boat, a little house – hovering like a ghost in a summoning circle. In her series *Damaged Goods*, she inscribes a china pattern into a plastic plate, imparting it with preciousness. The means vary, but the patience and skill of her execution is always extraordinary. Hers is a strange sort of craft, consisting as it does almost entirely in deletion. Yet she produces results as exquisite and as sublime as the historic landscape paintings that so often found their way on to pictorial ceramics.

Recently, Slotte has shifted from this exclusively manual approach. Rather than cutting into the surface with a tool, she has been using selective masking to create a pattern (she uses yellow-tinted epoxy for the purpose). She then sandblasts the whole piece, and finally scrapes the glue off with a paper knife. This process is still quite exacting – especially at the masking stage – but conceptually it is somewhat closer to printmaking, and visually, somewhere between the pointillism of Georges Seurat and the hand-painting Pop of Roy Lichtenstein. By placing herself into this lineage, Slotte is reinscribing the close relationship that existed between art, ceramics, and other forms of printed matter.

In this transhistorical view, we see how much Scott and Slotte share. The commonalities only begin with the found objects they use (though it's fun to hear them geeking out

about Rowland & Marsellus and other lesser-known manufactories). Both are fascinated by the important but little-regarded place that ceramics have in the history of visual culture; for many consumers, it was tableware that first brought impressions of distant vistas into the home.

Transferware's unprecedented distribution of "sights" – both in the sense of touristic destinations, and actual acts of seeing – was a crucial waystation in the onward rush of mass-produced images. They bridge the image-world of the eighteenth century, which was relatively sparse and artisanally-produced, with our own era of total and increasingly automated suffusion. Some of the scenes that appeared on blue-and-white china were entirely imaginary, including the hugely popular "Willow Pattern," almost an international brand in its own right. Others were topically accurate, at least to a degree, offering a different means of fantastical transport.

This complex telescopic array has been a central theme for both Scott and Slotte. His recent compartmentalized collages, set into trays originally used to hold printing type, are formally quite different from her *Landscape Multiples*. But in both cases, the material juxtaposition of fragments creates a viewing situation best described as virtual. Real space is held in suspension, caught up in a cascade of associative depiction. The potential inherent in historic transferware is thus unlocked, made pertinent to the era of online search.

Another equally relevant subject is the Readymade – which originated, of course, in Marcel Duchamp's appropriation of a ceramic object, at once the fountainhead of all subsequent conceptual art and a crude bit of bathroom humor. The closely related "Assisted Readymade" (that is, an altered *objet trouvé*) has since become to be a dominant mode of avant garde operation. Scott and Slotte are clearly within this tradition; the way that they transmute banal, mass-produced commodities into unique, expressive artworks is a characteristic feature of Duchampian appropriation. It's important to note, however, that both have a tremendous sensitivity to the specific artifacts that serve as their raw material. These platters and dishes may be easily sourced through eBay, but they can also be as much as two centuries old, and have had lives longer than any human being's. The act of "assisting" them asserts how much latent value they hold, how much respect they deserve.

This attentiveness comes across most clearly, perhaps, in the handling of imperfections, the features that would typically make an antique undesirable. Some of the most

beautiful moments in Slotte's pieces come through the preservation of old stains, which she allows to bloom across the white matte surface. Comparison might be made, here, to Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* of 1953, an artwork almost as notorious as Duchamp's *Fountain* but much more aesthetically suggestive, with its faint tracery of formerly expressionist marks. Scott, meanwhile, often uses *kintsugi* repair to give new life to broken pieces. In some of his most powerful recent compositions he uses the technique to combine parts from multiple objects, as in the mordant post-nuclear work *Fukushima No. 11*, which incorporates the motif of Hokusai's *Great Wave*, or the plate from his *Sleep of Reason* series in which a different kind of "wood cut" – the tragic destruction of formerly preserved National Park forests – is set against a second horizon of gold, as if to insist on the possibility of another, better future.

What can we conclude from this brief itinerary of Scott and Slotte's affinities? First, that despite all the important differences between their practices – the additive versus the subtractive, the explicit versus the implicit – they are really on the same page (or plate). But there's also a deeper lesson to be drawn from this convergence. Together, they show how art can open up an apparently inconsequential domain of material culture, showing it to be far more expansive than one could have imagined. "There are moments where I feel I've used up the material," Scott says. "But the more you dig into it, the more there is – it's a little universe of its own, this stuff called transferware." He's doubtless right, for he and Slotte have proved it time and again. They're charting their own paths in that confined yet cosmic space – two worlds orbiting one another, jointly illuminating our own.