

MATHEW WEIR A MAZE OF PARTS

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Amazingly Weird

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The fact that Houdini is still a household name, almost a century after his death, would suggest that people find the idea of escape exciting. It doesn't take a Freudian to notice that bursting out of water-filled barrels and digging your way out of being buried alive might resonate somehow with the idea of birth. Perhaps escape artists simply dramatise and give form to an unthinkable event that each and every one of us has necessarily experienced. But is it just the moment of release that seems gratifying, or is the locked-in part also attractive? And is our apparent enthusiasm for confinement and liberty really all about our mothers or, if you accept a psychoanalytic reading, might dads, law and language have something to do with it too?

Mathew Weir's exhibition, 'A Maze of Parts', is bursting with allusions to freedom, captivity, bondage, and liberation. A belt constricts a pillow. A straight jacket hangs limply from a wall. A white girl picks flowers while a black man stands in chains. The whole thing takes place in a former bank, a 'safe' place that can nonetheless be broken into (although if you're caught you'll go to prison, an unsafe place that can nonetheless be broken out of). The 'Maze' in the title again evokes the difficulty of getting out. Even works that don't immediately announce themselves as 'escape-related' lead us straight back to the theme. A bronze devil takes its form from Botticelli's 'Three Miracles of St Zenobius' which depicts an exorcism; demons are shown escaping from the mouths of two possessed brothers. A quiet print of a crackled surface offers a detail from the wall of a padded cell. Even a harmless-looking painted flower has been transposed from a cupboard owned by Anna Freud. In any other context it might be seen as a charming example of Austrian folk art, here it evokes claustrophobia, monsters, nightmares; the cracks on the surface of the image suggest psychic tension, or 'cracking up'.

In certain forms of madness, all thoughts lead back to the same place; if you think the aliens are out to get you, everything becomes proof. Because it's all in your head, there's nowhere you can run to. Weir's exhibition is maddening in this sense — there's no escape from the idea of escaping. Everywhere you look, you find it. A bronze necktie, inverted and noose-like, is titled, 'On the Threshold of Eternity'. A plaster cast of a pillow has a stake driven through it and takes its title from the ending of an Akutagawa Ryunosuke story: 'Isn't there anyone to come and strangle me quietly in my sleep?' The wish to get away is so palpable it's oppressive.

In Freudian theory — and in the popular imagination — art-making is thought to offer some relief from mental suffering. While regular neurotics have to make do with repressing their unseemly impulses, and perverts are inclined to do exactly what they like, artists have the third option of sublimating their drives through the objects they produce. Rather than damming up one's outlets for satisfaction, or acting on them straightforwardly, they can supposedly convert their more difficult or anti-social tendencies into

the production of strange, eloquent objects. In theory, it's great for them and for everyone else. The problem is that it doesn't really work that way. Everyone from accountants to zoo keepers sublimates, and artists can also be neurotic and perverse. No one can sublimate so successfully that their anguish actually vanishes. Not to mention the fact that being a working artist brings new problems all of its own; one can become a prisoner of one's own work, forced to repeat former successes or to produce new work on demand.

Mathew Weir's description of his painting process makes it sound like a peculiar form of self-punishment. His paintings bristle with meticulous, time-consuming detail. For the duration of the work he becomes a slave to the object, painting his way to freedom. Each time he puts himself through it, he promises never to do it again. (He survived one painting by listening to John le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* on repeat. Some might consider this diversion unendurable in itself. A distraction that drives you to distraction?) While the initial idea for the painting seems exciting, the tremendous task of its execution is a kind of living hell. Weir seems the very definition of a tortured artist, although he evidently takes it rather stoically, or at least isn't one to complain. Is it even possible he gets off on suffering? Certainly, the possibility of enjoyment in pain echoes throughout his work. On the one hand he appears to be alluding to real and horrifying forms of oppression, but then again doesn't his work also bring to mind the 'play' of BDSM?

This knotting together of enjoyment and suffering is anatomised in Freud's paper, 'A Child is Being Beaten' (1919). In it, he delineates various phases of the wish to beat or be beaten. In the first instance, the child either sees or imagines a sibling being physically punished by the father, and enjoys the fact that the father 'hates' the sibling and 'loves' them. In a second (repressed) phase the child fantasises about being beaten by the father as a punishment for his or her sexual impulses. Finally, the child daydreams about children being punished by authority figures, getting off on scenarios and stories where this happens. Freud particularly mentions Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which his clinical work had revealed to him to be a popular masturbation companion.

The figure of 'Uncle Tom' has appeared in Weir's work ever since he was given an image of a nineteenth century ceramic figurine depicting the character, featured in an old issue of the *National Geographic*. A caricature of a black man, the figurine was a present from a fugitive slave to an abolitionist. Like the novel itself, the object could be seen as excruciatingly kitsch and offensive, difficult to look at and to think about. On the one hand it has a kind of innocent charm, on the other it's the product of systematic cruelty and injustice. The combination is unbearable. What's 'nice' about Uncle Tom is also what's nasty; the 'adorable black folk' in Beecher Stowe's novel support every patronising racial stereotype. She rails against racism in a racist way. Still, her novel is sometimes credited with kicking off the American Civil War — and the gift of the figurine might suggest that black Americans were far from ungrateful. For a white person to take this figure and paint it, in forensic detail, could seem contrary or perverse. As friends of Weir's have apparently sometimes said, 'I don't know how you get away with it,' as if Weir himself is committing a visual felony.

As a child, Weir was fascinated by a book called 'The Sketchbook Crime', by Helen Morgan, in which a convalescent boy's sketches are examined by detectives in their attempt to solve a case. Like the photograph in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, details of the images promise vital clues. Weir's Uncle Tom paintings also register a crime, albeit one which is still in the process of being committed. It's uncomfortable and perplexing. As James Baldwin puts it, 'White people are trapped in a history they don't understand.' In order to solve the crime in the image we have to interrogate ourselves. While Weir is troubled by the idea that the history of slavery is not exactly his to speak about, he appears to be determinedly trying to process something about his own captivation by a troubling image. What holds his attention here?

Why is he inviting us to look at it? What has this crime got to do with us? To quote Baldwin again, 'I know you didn't do it and I didn't do it either, but I am responsible for it because I am a man and a citizen of this country, and you are responsible for it for the very same reason.' (Strangely, Weir himself had an actual 'Uncle Tom' — a quasi-relative whose place in the family was obfuscated for reasons that were never properly explained to him.)

The thing about Weir's work is that it makes your head hurt, exquisitely. There's so much to untangle that, like Ariadne, you risk getting lost. There are no straight lines to follow — everything starts to curve and twist until you lose your mental co-ordinates. The fact that it appears so thematically consistent can start to seem like a trick to lure you into a false sense of security (a phrase that could hardly be more relevant to the recent history of banking). The work looks like it's all about one thing, but then it seems to be alluding to another and another and another. Are we actually talking about race and oppression, or is that just a metaphor for something else? Would it be acceptable to use slavery as a metaphor? And if it's unacceptable, who should we hold to account? Mathew Weir, ourselves (for even entertaining the idea, however briefly) or the fact that language and signification are so slippery and inhuman that they don't differentiate between the serious and the non-serious, the meaningful and the meaningless, one Uncle Tom and another?

It looks like it's real but then it turns out that it's just a game. Or maybe it's the other way round. Get out of that, Houdini...