

'WASTE MATERIAL'

The Drawing Room, London
3 February to 13 March 2005

Reviewed by Cameron Irving

The edition of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* that sits on my bookshelf was bought on a whim based on the attraction of its cover – a version of a drawing made by the nineteenth century geologist Henry De La Beche. My impulse was based on the seductive semi-scientific image of pre-historic beasts chomping away at each other in a weird land, which awoke a childhood enthusiasm for dinosaurs, and an adult eagerness for erudition.

Waste Material, curated by Dave Musgrave, was a hybrid of a museum exhibition and a contemporary art show. Alongside the contemporary work, hung a drawing by the surrealist Yves Tanguy and a nineteenth century lithograph on loan from the Natural History Museum. This lithograph, entitled, *Duria antiquior* is a version of De La Beche's original drawing that adorns my copy of *The Origin of Species*. Made around 1830, by George Scharfe, the lithograph takes De La Beche's original, which was based on fossil evidence, and applies a degree of imagination that takes the image outside the Natural Sciences into the realm of materialist fantasy.

If the De La Beche/Scharfe images represent a pre-historical state, than the work of Hannah Greenly presents a post-historical one. They say cockroaches would be the sole surviving species in the event of global nuclear fallout, and Greenly's *Collapsed Sculpture* (2003) is one daddy of a cockroach. Squashed by some unknown cause, it is like some mutant creature from a post-human future, reared on the debris of its nuked descendents. Her *Assembly* (2001) is a papier-mâché ladder crawling with insects, which also addresses a post-human scene, where bugs have replaced the previous dominant species. Even Rupert Norfolk's beautiful sculpture of autumnal leaves – simply called *Leaves* (2003) – had not escaped the attention of the bugs. Made from sheets of wafer thin ply folded into generic leaf forms, these pieces of wooden origami reveal details of wormholes and disintegration through bacteria. This sculpture addresses decay and biological degradation, yet presents us with sterile replicants that have been through a process of shaping, forming and reforming to make a simulacrum of nature.

This initiating of the relationship between the subject and its origins, informed a dialogue that ran throughout the work in the exhibition. Discarded fragments form the origin of Clare Stevenson's work. Constructions made from scraps of wood, wire and reproductions of works from art history are then drawn, and reproduced as works on paper. *The Eel* (2003) is a creature made from a number of twisting figures that look as if they have been plucked from a renaissance depiction of *The Last Judgment*. While the eel twists back on itself – as if pointing to its own origins – it also forms a curl of regurgitated imagery, or an accumulation of waste, perhaps excreted by the animal that is Western Art history.

Art history crops up again (maybe something wasn't digested properly), and more literally this time, in the frail works of William Daniels. Based on

Untitled Number 34 Spring 2005

well-known religious paintings, these little oils on wood first seem like collages that have been worked over with paint. However, the techniques of collage serve only as a starting point. Roughly torn shreds of paper are assembled to reveal images that precisely refer to the original paintings from which they derive. They are then replicated with paint, leaving the appearance of collage, but finally return to the materials that provided their beginnings. Similarly Musgrave takes torn paper as the starting point for his work *Paper golem no.3* (2005). Previous *Golems* have existed on the horizontal or vertical plane only, as either wall based constructions or works lying directly on the floor. This version, made from painted aluminium, is the first of the series that is free standing. Defying gravity, it intrudes on our bipedal space, countering the floppy horizontality naturally dictated by paper. The figure also seems to have been born from its own impossibly disproportioned limb – a limb about the size of an adult's arm – suggesting the origins of its own creation.

The complex engagement with process in all of the works in 'Waste Material' illuminated the temporal nature of matter and its subjections to the laws of change and flux. By exploring their origins – by both looking back and leaping forward – these works also went beyond a principle of evolutionary no-return to look at matter's overriding dictator: time.

Yves Tanguy, drawing, circa 1940

