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BECKY BEASLEY
LATE WINTER LIGHT

Opening Tuesday, 23 January, 7 pm
Until March 2018

There is the kind of exhibition where an artist explores new paths, tries out solutions, performs experiments. And then there is the kind where she takes stock and looks back over the road traveled. Late Winter Light is the latter. It juxtaposes works early works with others made recently; it spans all the media the artist has tackled to date (photography, sculpture, and the latest addition, video); it touches each key aspect of her practice. Analogue photography as a meditation on time and mortality; the dialogue between photography and sculpture; the work of other artists (mainly writers) as a starting point for her own.

The exhibition opens with a **series of Polaroids** from 2002, never previously exhibited. They belong to the period when Beasley first began to photograph individual objects, isolated on a neutral background. There is a clear element of melancholy in these images, perhaps even of grief, but an unexpected touch of humor also creeps in. The items she has chosen (a feather duster, a plastic plant) have undeniable comic potential, like props in a slapstick routine, recalling Beasley's first love, the work of Irish writer, Samuel Beckett. Another early photographic work in the show, **The Left Door / La Dernière Porte (Athens Archive) (2004-05)**, is a large-scale print showing the door of an empty storefront in Athens. In the printing stage, the negative was flipped along its vertical axis, so that the door handle seems designed for the left hand rather than the right. It is a sinister work, in both the normal and the etymological sense: this door that opens the wrong way, seems laden with portent. "All the decisive blows are struck left-handed" was the quote from Walter Benjamin's "One-Way Street" that accompanied this work when it was shown at Laura Bartlett Gallery (London, 2016).

Sedum Joy (Double Grave) is an early negative, printed and tinted only last year. The subject is a Sedum spectabile, "Autumn Joy", in flower; the print is black and white, but two of the blossoms have been hand-tinted. The work shows the domestic garden of Beasley's childhood home, where her dog was buried and the ashes of her paternal grandmother were scattered (hence the subtitle). The color—a poisonous shade of pinkish orange—glows in contrast to the austere black and white, like a will-o'-the-wisp hinting at the presence of death.

Sedum Joy (Double Grave) was shown in an exhibition titled Ous (Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne, UK 2017), one of Beasley's finest in recent years. The show was inspired by a late watercolor by Eric Ravilious, a British painter, designer and illustrator who died in the Second World War in 1942, at the age of 39. This work, The Bedstead, shows the hotel room where Ravilious found himself confined by bad weather when he came to Le Havre in the spring of 1939, intending to paint en plein air: a modest room, mostly occupied by a metal bed. On the wallpaper behind it, the painter has left an incongruous blank rectangle. Struck by that emptiness, Beasley chose the watercolor (which occupied a central position in the show) as the key note for a delicate symphony of works that touched on many themes (love and grief, domestic interiors, the garden), linking the story of Ravilious to the story of a personal friend who had suffered a loss.

Like Sedum Joy, other works from Ous have also migrated into Late Winter Light. The ones most directly linked to Ravilious's watercolor are **Spring Equinox, Morning (Floorboards), Spring Equinox, Afternoon (Floorboards) and Winter Light (Tone, Rain)**, all from 2017. The artist created them using the early photographic technique of cyanotype, which yields images in a characteristic range of blue tints, and are developed

with sunlight. As a surface for her cyanotypes, Beasley has used old, monogrammed French linens. On two of these bedsheets, the photosensitive emulsion has been brushed on live tracing the lines of the floorboards in her studio, one vertically, the other horizontally; on the third, toned to a brown shade, she has created an enlarged version of the empty rectangle in Ravilious's watercolor, but in the lower rather than the upper half. (This shift is emphasized by an inverted reproduction of the watercolor that hangs behind the work, proposing the enlarged rectangle as a projection.) Pushed to the limits of abstraction, photography returns here to its origins (and to what Roland Barthes saw as its quintessence): the fact that it captures the light of a specific place and time, in an impression whose enduring nature makes us keenly aware of the fleeting, precarious nature of the thing from which it sprang.

Precariousness: two other works from Ous also touch on this fundamental element of human experience, as inseparable from the affections as a photograph's positive print is from its negative. The first, *Untitled* (2017) is an ottoman, a sculpture made up of two elements, one circular, the other crescent-shaped, nestled against each other (The two forms are inspired by the central element in *Eclipse of the Sunflower* by British painter Paul Nash, who, like his friend Ravilious, was an official war artist during World War II). The caption tells us that the materials include a pair of eyeglasses and a watch, but the viewer will look for them in vain: they have been stuffed into the crevice. The choice to hide the two items evokes an ordinary, everyday experience (losing something in the crack between sofa cushions) but could also refer to the loss of a loved one: glasses and watches are the kind of personal possessions that family members are most likely to keep and cherish. About six months before Beasley was invited to do a show at the Towner Art Gallery, there was indeed a death in her immediate circle: David, a close friend of the artist, lost his partner. However indirectly and elliptically, *Untitled* responds to that moment of grief. The last work from Ous, is **The Seat Cushion (A Mourning Joke) (2017)**, a room installation, and a major work for the artist. The central element in this piece is the reconstruction of an armchair that belonged to David's partner. Beasley designed the chair based on a photograph, a sweatshirt which David had kept in mourning and his memory. Memory of the loved ones body was fundamental to the designing of the chair. Using the sweatshirt as a template, Beasley made a cushion for the seat. She decorated the cover with cyanotype prints of drawings that David, in mourning, made at her request. Motifs such as plants and flowers, a watch, a ring and a vase were printed on a set of seven cushion covers, six of which are framed and hung around the room. Toning, bleaching and dip-dyeing with chalk paint were all processes which allowed the artist to produce a pale rainbow of colours across the seven set cushions. The final element, the colour photograph **365 days**, was shot on the anniversary of D.s death, in David's garden, where he has scattered his ashes, a repost to the domestic garden setting of *Sedum Joy (Double Grave)*. *365 days* was made in specific reference to Felix Gonzales Torres', "Untitled" (Alice B Toklas' and Gertrude Stein's Grave, Paris), 1992.

The domestic sphere has always been central to Beasley's work: most of the sculptures she has made to date are based on the shapes of furnishings (shelves, folding screens, tables) and of the objects kept in them (books, shoeboxes). The armchair and cushion covers in Ous are no exception. But they also point to another element that has only recently taken on importance in the artist's work, which one might call a stronger feeling of connection to other human beings. Earlier on, the sense of time and mortality that always underlie her work were accompanied by a painfully introverted attitude: Beasley's work spoke, first and foremost, of loneliness. (The Polaroids that open *Late Winter Light* are eloquent in this regard.) In *The Seat Cushion*, the same sense of precariousness, rather than being an element of separation, becomes a link to other people: a meeting ground where we can recognize each other as similar, all subject to the same fate.

Another element that has come to the fore of Beasley's work in her most recent shows is autobiography; and more specifically—since the artist's life has always been present in her works—a frank new approach to private matters such as love and motherhood. One of her most forthright works in this sense is the set of posters **Foresight I-VI (2015)**. At the top of each one is a sculpture of Beasley's that was inspired by Carlo Mollino, *Perinde Ac Cadaver* (2011), photographed from different angles and accompanied by information about its

exhibition history over a four-year span (2011-14). At the bottom are brief, intense pieces of writing that retrace the most important events in the artist's personal life in that same period of time: meeting her partner, living together, conceiving their first child after a miscarriage. Private life and professional life run parallel to each other, reflect each other, intertwine: this is Beasley's quiet but firm response to a widespread (typically male) attitude that tries to separate the two spheres, or even present them as conflicting.

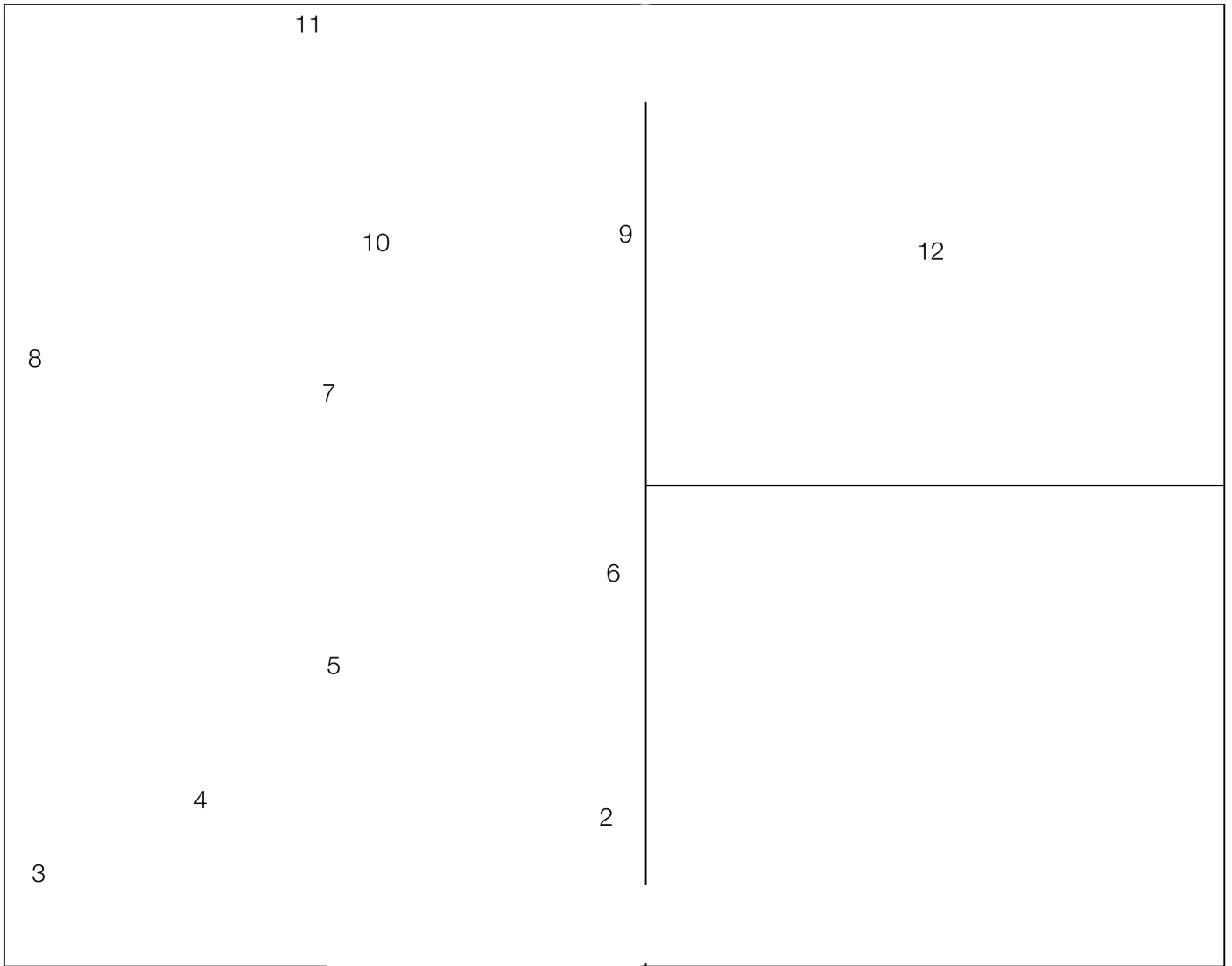
Next to Foresight, a video work (**A Man Restored a Broken Work, 2015**) also ties together public and private, art and life: we see a man (Beasley's partner) calmly, carefully repairing a small sculpture by the artist that was damaged in transit. This is a work about the care that springs from love: the care for objects, and the other care—for bodies—that this delicately evokes. The title of the video, *A Man Restored*, is an allusion to Bresson's famous film *A Condemned Man Escaped* (*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*). The choice of title suggests a desire to emulate, in much shorter form, the challenge that the great French filmmaker posed himself: to reveal from the outset, in the title itself, the thing that the viewer will see (the "what"), in order to concentrate instead on the way it will be shown (the "how"). In Beasley's case, the "how" consists in fixed shots (filmed, however, with a hand-held camera that is sometimes congenially shaky) that focus only on her partner's hands at work—a stylistic hallmark of Bresson that can be seen in the opening sequence of *A Man Escaped*.

The last works we will discuss here, the two **Kissing Benches (2017)**, are the most recent in *Late Winter Light*. They were first shown at Beasley's first exhibition in the United States, *A Gentle Man* (80WSE Gallery, New York, 2017), which the prominent New York Times critic Roberta Smith hailed as "impeccable." Inspired by Bernard Malamud's short story "Spring Rain," the exhibition merged the fictitious figure of its protagonist with the real figures of Malamud and of the artist's father. In the four videos that formed the heart of the show, texts by or connected to Malamud, read in voiceover, accompanied brief close-ups of a man, Peter Beasley, and then a shot of his intense face, wet with rain (from a shower). The twin metal chairs placed in all the rooms were sculptures, but also seating that could be used to watch the videos and read the exhibition printed matter. (Chances are that you are sitting on one of them too, while reading this text). The angle of the backrests can be changed with a simple gesture, either lining them up (so that they are facing the same way) or setting them opposite each other (so that two people can meet face-to-face).

A Gentle Man marks a clear break (perhaps a definitive one) with the solipsistic attitude of Beasley's early work. The main character in the Malamud story in question is an aging man who when suddenly confronted with death—as a chance witness to a young man being fatally hit by a car—discovers the ephemeral, touching beauty of life: his own, and other people's. If Beasley was so struck by the story that she had dedicated an earlier exhibition to it in 2013, titled *Spring Rain*, it must have touched a deep chord which continues to resonate through her works. In a passage which Beasley cites in the film, Malamud writes that the point of a short story is "to say everything that must be said and to say it quickly, fleetingly, as though two people had met for a moment in a restaurant, or a railroad station, and one had time only to tell the other they are both human, and, here, this story proves it." This may be a writer's (marvelous) definition of a literary form, but it also perfectly describes the spirit of Beasley's work in recent years. In the end, inside the sophisticated web of citation and allusion, what is expressed is the pressing need to say is one thing, always the same: that both artist and viewer are human. And, here, this exhibition—*Late Winter Light*—proves it.

Simone Menegoi, January 2018

A catalogue to accompany the exhibition *Ous* is forthcoming. Please contact the gallery for information



1. *Kissing Bench*, 2017
2. *Polaroids (SX- 70)*, 2001
3. *Sedum Joy (Double Grave)*, 2002-2017
4. *Untitled*, 2017
5. *Spring Equinox, Afternoon (Floorboards)*, 2017
6. *The left door/La Dernière Porte (Athens Archive)*, 2004/2005
7. *Spring Equinox, Morning (Floorboards)*, 2017
8. *Foresight (I-VI)*, 2015
9. *A man restored a broken work*, 2015
10. *Kissing Bench*, 2017
11. *Winter Light (Tone, Rain)*, 2017
12. *The Seat Cushion (A Mourning Joke)*, 2017