

## Eden and After

### Edward Colless

Here is Del Kathryn Barton's garden of earthly delights as "the whole of everything": in a plenitude, a "plenitopia" that allows no exclusions, no escape. That permits everything. That blossoms from every opening. That buds from every extremity. These are bodies whose hair or fur spurts from their skin like a million anxiously exposed, flayed nerve fibres swaying in a tidal drift and entangling themselves with anything that comes in reach. These are organs that multiply as lurid and frightening appendages, erupting like blisters or buboes or growing uncontrollably into tentacles and feelers. This is skin whose pores break out as countless incandescent spots, spreading in blots and blemishes and feverish rashes across the canvas as a bed sheet on which writhing figures knot their limbs and fingers and sprout worm-like tendrils that entwine each other, coiling and sticking and twirling in grasping sexual embraces. There is no exhaustion in this scenario, no limit and no deficiency. Every thing pours into, crawls over, sucks on, nuzzles up against, spills onto every other thing. This is a hallucinatory organicism, nature bubbling like fermenting foam, like a fibrous stew of ducting and swimming worms; sensation extended to an unnaturally, supernaturally, serene convulsion... into an ornamental glyph, like an ornate scar or tattoo on trembling skin.

You have to expect this much delight to be monstrous. For such a world there can be no categorial distinctions between human and animal, mineral or vegetable. Unlike Arcimboldo's portraits fabricated from an obscene expenditure of nature's bounty, there is no optical illusion in Barton's images, no degree of scale at which one evident thing (an absurd stack of fruit) morphs into something else (a blotchy, clownlike face). The metamorphosis in Arcimboldo's imagery occurs at the transcendent level of the *Gestalt*, with the apprehension of a total, metastable, sublimated form (a face) greater than and thus distinct from the sum of its constituent material parts (the items of fruit). Fruit and face must be essentially dissimilar, must in fact remain lucid in their opposition, in order for their forms to compare integrally, and to lay the foundation for the aesthetic enjoyment and comedy of the illusion. Barton's totemic, hieratic, cosmetic doll figures metamorphose instead the way pagan heroes do, like Daphne turning into a tree at the touch of Apollo; or as creatures bewitched and spellbound by fairies or mutated by a *djinn*'s curse or by a transgression in a fable; or as the sorts of hybrid creatures abominated in Leviticus: unclassifiable creatures, or at least provisionally classified as atrocities and which bleed their essence through their joints and orifices. Deformities. Their mutation is more like a discharge than a sublimation. The whole that is everything for Barton is not a form—not, that's to say, a *Gestalt*—but a substance coalescing, volatilising, a fever cooking away inside the organs of sense that are overextended: spots, lines, stains, splatters, washes of colour, lumps, threads, beading like cicatrization, like goose bumps... these are all instances of this supernatural material that is quickened and made worldly by turning around upon itself, a libidinal substance

that licks itself into taut strands and swellings; these are instances which proliferate as an exquisite encysting of skins. We see these cysts as condensations of paint or ink, as buttons and knots of repetitive—manically repetitive—pleasure. Pleasure through repetition. Particular densities of sensation accumulate and intensify through overproduction as beautiful tumours, sweet spots of cruelty. The whole that is everything, this consuming whole of pleasure, is as fatal as it is fertile, as voiding and emetic as it is fulfilling: it is devastating, going off, it comes, it drains; it is a hole. Everything is a hole, everything that excretes pleasure.

In Barton's Garden of Eden the fateful apple is offered up in temptation toward a cosmically indefinite sky, like a sacrifice or a trophy: a new-born thing aloft in celebration. Poised like a basketball on Eve's elegantly pale but tiny and almost child-like hands, the forbidden fruit radiates spectral emanations resembling soft fur bristling with static electricity or cascades of lace flourished and compacted like a carnation bloom. And, readily responsive to the seduction, another hand—presumably that of Adam's—reaches down, equally seductively, to take it. But in that auroral sky this hand has the immense scale of a god's, moving like the hand of Michelangelo's divine creator as he leans out of the cloud on the Sistine ceiling to reach toward the tip of Adam's finger and conduct the spark of life into languid matter, and with the visceral probing of Caravaggio's doubting Thomas, slipping his finger under the fleshy lip of the open wound in Christ's side. However, Barton's monumental yet pallid, even ghostly hand is drawn in a way too similar to Eve's to be unambiguously masculine (whether godlike or mortal). Attenuated in flattened cartoon contours that evoke Japanese anime rendering (the bent finger has the balletic lightness of Sailor Moon's legs), it's more a pop demonological fantasy—an animistic detonation of demonic identity like a scene from Legend of the Overfiend—than it is mythological or Biblical iconography. And it is the apple that takes the hand, rather than the reverse. Barton's androgynous god, or hermaphrodite Adam, extends fingers toward and pokes into the fruit that ruptures in obscene ripeness at its touch: a wound curling back its lips in delectation of its own lushness; a wet mouth opening in expectation; a vagina squirting its jaculate in bleeding trails through the ether and winding in scarring filaments upward along the fingers that stroke the flesh open.

Are these hands offering up temptation not the same hands, the artist's, cast in blackened bronze, that stretch up from the floor between the legs of one of the wooden tripod creatures, rearing up toward the scrotal sack that hangs ponderously from under the wooden bowl of its fat belly? Look again, and this herniated ball, ripe as the Edenic apple, is veined with the same coloured threads that stick like stinging sea-wasp tentacles to "Adam's" hand in the Garden of Eden. But here they're beaded strands, strung together in a thick cluster as if this tripod monster, which is operated by

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a stuffed mutant wide-eyed bunny mounted in a bell-jar—this three legged Pinocchio, this cantankerous Magic Pudding—is carrying a heavy sack of spider eggs or roe in its crotch, a bulbous sack ready to burst. What kinds of appalling things would come scrambling out of these eggs, and how many thousands of them? This is a monstrous birth, a birth in fable, if it happens. This egg sack, all this abundant creativity, this tangled hive, is being squeezed out of the belly like a demon baby's head. Yet those obstetric hands struggle against themselves, both in battle and in distraction: the right hand strains upward to deliver the baby or perhaps is just unable to refrain from the enticement of stroking the engorged genitalia—perhaps that's the mode of midwifery expected for this miraculous birth in a world so crowded with excitement; the left hand grips the right to hold it cautiously back, or alternatively to embrace and support it, sensuously caressing it and getting it going. And these black fingers: we see them condensed into the semi-tumescent black penis that sprouts hilariously as a stalk from the core of the Halloween pumpkin sitting on the companion three-legged stool; an enchanted, fairytale pumpkin that puckers like swollen lips clamped around its snake tongue as it pokes out, feeling about for food, lips taut as a sphincter muscle, or like the vaginal labia splitting open the inside of the tempting fruit. These two sculptures, as much as the paintings in the show, are images of Edenic temptation. The primordial couple, hermaphroditic and comically grotesque (a dick-head, an air-head?), but dangerously full of their progeny, ripe with seed. Adam and Eve. Below the waist their hybrid bodies are composed from rustic, scarred chopping blocks: castrating butchery indicated by the crude knives that point threateningly up the leg, and that lop the artist's hands off. And, there in the white clinical display cabinets, these two figures stand side by side as ceremonial and fastidiously arrayed as Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini* bride and bridegroom in the bedchamber, but with their dismembered parts, their flayed faces decorated by mosaic appliqué as intense and violent as bejewelled Mayan skulls, and with their internal plumbing eviscerated and hopelessly mixed up... all this as if they were the interred, mummified corpses of Adam and Eve, stored alongside fake food and totemic companions for the after-life and with their ossified, vitreous organs extracted... all this, waiting on resurrection. Is this Adam's and Eve's punishment, like the artist's dismemberment, the bride stripped bare for wanting experience of the difference between good and evil, for wanting too much of creation? A living death?

But the compressed comic ambiguities of these sculptures don't just reduce to this sort of caricature. In fact, this Edenic world of Del Kathryn Barton's, the whole of everything, is beyond good and evil: its pleasures are punishing in the degrees of their endurance and intensity, not as penalties for transgressions. This is not quite the familiar archetype of Eden. In middle eastern myth the name of Eden denotes a primary, open possibility of substance: equally forest, desert, steppe in its earlier Sumerian usage, and a qualifying state of abundance or luxuriance in the Semitic stem of the name. With the Biblical allegory, we easily mistake all of Eden to be this private garden—it's what we see as a moment of heaven on earth: the memory of providence witnessed

on some exotic beach under a blue sky, in the volumes of a cherished and exquisite and graspable lover's body, through the infinite ornament of a palace or the hypnotic dazzle of a political or religious spectacle we feel we ultimately belong to. But the paradise garden is wilderness divided against itself, walled in with its gates guarded by a flaming sword. The garden mirroring the kingdom of God requires this protective caul, this impermeable skin of the ego as a shield, defining it against the chaotic stimulation of a disorganised storm of nature beyond the skin. It's this storm of sensation that God in creating the world turns his attention from, an ungodly residue of nature, toxic naturalness—the substance of Adam's first wife, the exiled demonic Lillith, rather than temptress scapegoat Eve—excluded from that consecrated nature which God provides for his creations. And it's this skin around the garden—around a providential nature, providing its creatures with their place: organs, egos, species within the matrix in which they properly belong, in which in an organ, an ego, an animal lives at home with itself, in its natural function—this skin with its burning orifice that remains shut until redemption like the gateway of the Law; it's this unspoken but assumed prohibition that earths the energy of creation, condensing it into organic form, turning aesthetics to a labour under the Law: nature is made by the laws of nature—this could well have been the rule written in fire over the gates of Eden as totalitarian and ominous as *Arbeit Macht Frei*. What is not lawful nature is an abomination, an unnatural or supernatural falseness. Everything true comes from the Law, true art included, and the Law closes the door until it redeems you, at the very end of everything. Paradoxically, when expelled from the garden, Adam and Eve are not “exposed”, not locked outside the garden, but condemned inside its law wherever they go; they will only stand in the open, truly exposed and naked to the storm, as outlaws—that's to say, lawless—at the very end of their time, when they give up and give in to the Law, when the work of life finally makes them free, when the Law appears to take them back like lost sheep, even if it has always secretly been herding them into their death.

In contrast, Barton's Edenic nature unfastens the skin of the ego at every point, along every line, through every plane. Aesthetic pleasure in Barton's drawings effloresces from the skin, compulsively radiating from its contours and its cleavages as profligate openings. Even the hand-stitching of patches and sequins in her mannequins and mutant dolls seems to unravel and fray the joins as if the sutures were like the frenetic hatching and dotting and fish scales that shiver in waves across her paintings. In one drawing of a naked woman pinned as Leonardo's *Virtuvian Man* on a white background, vulvas open through stigmata in the palms of her hands—an allusion, perhaps, to Cocteau's unforgettable image in *The Blood of the Poet*, of the talking mouth displaced from the statue of the muse into the palm of the poet's writing hand, a mouth that crawls over his body, beneath his own self-caress, kissing and fellating him in an auto-erotic delirium. An allusion, too, to a type of artistic crucifixion: the stigmatised hands are pierced by what appear to be paintbrushes; but, as with the sculpted penises gripped by the magic pumpkin lips, while these brushes penetrate the hands they are also

held as if ready to go to work, poised by the vulval lips much as the woman in the Chinese Ming era novel *Prayer Mat of the Flesh* uses her vagina to hold the calligraphic brush with which she writes her impassioned love letters. Penetration is an outpouring, a channelling of sensation in discharge. The bodies in Barton's art—of whatever species—can have no sanctuary, no consecrated interiors, no gardens of the ego or the soul; they are not temples of love. With every pulse they mutate. They are infinitely open—not as pacific, suffering, or passive receptacles, not even as hungry cavities but as Edenic entwined forests of signs, as flashfloods and mudslides, as lichen blooming. They are torrential.

This is a nature that is barely “organic”: its motion is that of non-nurturing feeding—the multiple teats that sprout off Barton's fantastic figures might resemble the exaggerated fertile physiognomy of an archaic mother goddess, but they are more like fingers, or sores, or leech-like suckers. There is no primordial femininity in this Eden, but a kind of frantic or hyperactive luxury, saturation, a wallowing in the false universality of sex as if it were of the essence of things. Florid sex: exactly as in Hegel's exhilaratingly perverse, contemptuous characterisation of flowers as a sexuality that is superfluous for reproduction. Hegel saw the flower's property of effusive sexiness to be at the expense of its sexual essence: sexuality is an inessential factor of the flower. When Hegel (in his *Encyclopaedia*) anatomises plants as mere accumulations of quantitative factors—of substances promoting undeviating processes—it's because plants lack the complex internal organs of animals (including humans), which govern appetite and free the human to digest their food away from the feeding trough or carcass (and by analogy, in human sexuality for eros to store up, enhance and also govern lust). In contrast to this complex interiority of the animal—especially the human with its sublimation of appetite into aspiration, its overcoming of necessity in an autonomous self-conscious universality—in comparison to this potential and promise of the elevation of our animality, plants are complacent and impotent. For Hegel, they lack the configuration (*Gestaltung*) of form and function that generate true organs in animals and humans; configuration which elaborates as the individuation and organized implementation of differentiated tools (hand, penis, eye, vagina, etc), essential members, within the self-relating unity of the erotic body (within the skin of the ego), a bodily configuration that Freud called “genitality”, a state free of perversion or neurotic symptom-formation. Human desire is a labour toward genitality, toward a redeeming recognition of the Law as natural, as necessity; or, what we might call a return of the sublime productivity of the Garden of Eden.

The flowering of the plant is, in contrast, idle. Worse, in fact, than idle. Since the flower is a confusion of sexualities (the so-called “perfect flower”—with stamen and pistils—being hermaphroditic), it lacks a unitary essence of sexuality while (as its mode of reproduction) it overproduces genitality. Reproduction as flowering is an emission, a mode of excretion. The flower is the opening out, the inflammation, of a hole. Waste. Genitality is wasted, squandered in the flower. It is superficial, if not superfluous to the flower, yet is overproduced as a seduction of nature. This is why Adam

and Eve in Barton's mythic idiom are neither exclusively male nor female, and not entirely human, but a perverse flowering; it's why the stimulus of temptation, in the finger prodding the open fruit, is overwhelmed by its response; it's why desire—the entwining, enmeshing of animal, vegetable and mineral, and the eruption of genitality in these non-human forms—is profligate rather than reproductive; and why, despite the copulatory frenzy and the hospitable suckling, there is no consoling maternity, no archetypal mother goddess, no gynaecological core to the genesis of Barton's world. Only the drive of nature, driven to seduce through its genital overproduction. We see this seductive nature as a frivolous lushness, debauching providential nature: like Baudelaire's evil flower, or Blake's sick rose, contaminating the Garden by causing its skin to erupt in these fantastic genital blooms. Deceptive, hypnotic—but also voracious—this flowering is, paradoxically, both the bait and the camouflage of the Venus trap. We see it as an obvious lure, as trickery, as a sick sweetness lacing the jaws of the predator. It is what John Carpenter, in his remake of Howard Hawks' sci-fi movie, pictured as *The Thing*: a sponge-like pseudo-body with no containing skin, no proper organs, no digestion and thus no inner organization; an unnameable contaminant that is nothing but the lumpy, cartilaginous synthesis of whatever it indiscriminately touches, copulates with and thus incorporates, and the ingredients of which break out like sunspots throughout its fuming and coagulating bio-mass. *The Thing* is an Edenic “creature”, but of teeming outsideness, of exposure and lawlessness, a flowering, rather than the genetic cultivation of the walled Garden.

Is this then the temptation in the Garden? Is not such temptation the obscene or fantastic or derisory birth that Del Kathryn Barton persistently offers us, tempts us with: the nativity of *The Thing*? St Augustine speculated, with breathtaking audacity, on the nature of sexual desire and temptation in the Garden of Eden: in his *City of God* (Book XIV) he asks whether, prior to the Fall, Adam would have experienced an erection. What a question! Adam covers his penis after the Fall, says Augustine, not due to a new-found sense of the shame of nakedness, but because of what that nakedness reveals: that his erection now happens without his consent or control. It has a will of its own, attained through Adam's rebellion in his wish to exert his will against God's. Libido is what Augustine calls the will when, as Adam yields to temptation, it surpasses the boundary instituted for it by God; that's to say, when the will is outside its organ, outside the place where it properly belongs. This unnaturally over-extended organic drive, in other words, is *The Thing*. But Augustine's argument implies that the erection was not always libidinal—that before the Fall Adam willed his erection without desire, willed it in a motion that was identical to the natural law of the Garden, and identical with God's will. That it was God's erection. How did this erection move? Like the bare hand, says Augustine: the penis was a hand consciously and completely controlled by Adam, manoeuvred without any unconscious influences, without any obscurity of intention or function or effect. This sounds comical but it has a deliciously dark side: after the Fall, the erection eats its way out of the dark interior of infected Adamic subjectivity

much like the carnivorous phallic cyclopean baby alien during the famously traumatic birth scene in the mess hall in Ridley Scott's film *Alien*, when it rips itself free of the man's belly it has been incubating within and stands momentarily and threateningly erect against the blurry background of the quivering agonised body of its unconscious human host, whose hands are twisted in a dying spasm. Part of that body, but attached now only as a parasite, a partial object projected out from—disowned by—the body as its uncontrollable desire, and a sign of death. Adam's Edenic erection was an immortal sex, but it has this death coiled inside its sealed skin waiting to be born. After the Fall, the hands are the mnemonic device for a lost unity of the body's desire with God's—the father's—desire: touch with them... heal or hurt with them, give or take with them, pray with them: these are your bare hands, the sincere and trustworthy labouring organs of the Law of nature. Hold hands to signal the pure unity of the couple, the bond of Platonic love. Yet, as we observe in Barton's work, the hand has a competence for taking any number of functional shapes: fist, claw, paw, cup, labia, probe, pincer, antennae, clamp... etc; with any of these capable of fisting, clawing, pawing, probing, sucking... etc any number of organs. As we see in Barton's restlessly coiled, fidgeting, fondling, posturing menagerie, the hand doesn't gesture toward the inner death of sexuality, but gives birth to a monstrously exposed life. We can say that contrary to the Edenic hand conforming to or representing God's will, in Barton's work it is an acrobatically supple openness: a hole that opens new holes; an ungodly flowering of all things in *The Thing*. The whole of everything.

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