

Becky Beasley: 'Ous' at the Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne

By Laura Garmeson

May 2017



Becky Beasley's enigmatic artworks, primarily comprising sculpture and photography, have received international acclaim, yet with her new solo show she returns home to East Sussex where she lives and works. Currently on display at the Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne, 'Ous' was commissioned as a response to the gallery's extensive collection of works by Eric Ravilious and a prelude to Towner's exhibition starting later in May, 'Ravilious & Co: The Pattern of Friendship.' Beasley's exhibition is composed of a series of intimately considered installations touching on themes of nature, mourning and domesticity, and establishes a dialogue between these two local artists, past and present.

'I did not intend to get inside Eric Ravilious' watercolour, "The Bedstead", but that's how it went.' This quote from Becky Beasley, printed in the exhibition guide to 'Ous', can be said to sum up the artist's idiosyncratic way of working. 'It was the flatness that drew me in. A burrow.' Beasley

likes to get right inside her subject matter, 'burrowing' into it to see what she will find. In this case the burrow is Ravilious' painting, which served as a starting point of sorts for this series of installations, and is displayed here alongside Beasley's work. 'The Bedstead' is, on the face of it, an unremarkable image – a narrow single bed sits in a room painted in Ravilious' famously flattened, woodcut-terresque style – and looks to be little more than a modest interior space, with its patterned walls, foreshortened shapes and crisp white linen spread over the bed-frame. But for Beasley and her burrow, the image contains multitudes.

The six rooms in 'Ous' contain fragments of ideas from Ravilious' initial painting, which Beasley picks apart, turns upside down and breaks down into various distinct elements. In the first room, two plain black rectangles cut from linoleum adorn the floor, the size of a single and a double bed. Above them on the wall, a large photograph in gelatin silver print bears the title 'Sedum Joy (Double Grave)'. Depicting a bouquet-like patch of sprouting weeds, its composition recalls an Old Masters still life with flowers, but its subject matter is in fact the artist's family garden, specifically the burial site of one of her pets. Beasley, whose art frequently plays with language, takes the central symbol of 'The Bedstead' and unpacks it etymologically: 'bed' is linked to gardens and flowerbeds, but also to the ultimate place of rest, the grave. Glancing down at the black shapes on the floor, their meaning becomes fluid. Are they a bed, a garden, a grave, or all three?

Themes of death and its relationship to the natural world as well as the world of interiors are thus established early on, hinging around Ravilious' bedstead. Brian Cass, head of exhibitions at Towner, described the gallery's decision to approach Beasley as being due to 'an affinity' between her and Ravilious in terms of 'the exploration of a domestic everyday,' and a shared reappraisal of the importance of 'minor art'. In her deconstruction of Ravilious' painting, Beasley both celebrates the quotidian and the domestic, and subtly blurs the lines between what constitutes a painting and a photograph, through a fascinating series of cyanotypes – photographs developed on fabric using sunlight reacting with a chemical emulsion – on vintage monographed French linen. 'There is this really interesting overlap between early photography and watercolour,' Cass explains. The large sheets of linen strung up on lines, shot through with blue lines reminiscent of Ravilious' painted floorboards, could easily evoke either laundry hanging out to dry, pieces of painted canvas, or photographs developing in a darkroom. They are perhaps best described, to use Cass' term, as 'sculptural photographs'.

Other objects similarly resonate with light and with the natural world, but they also echo Ravilious' creative friendships. The ottoman inspired by a painting of a solar eclipse by Ravilious' friend Paul Nash, the sweeping rays of sunlight carved out in linoleum on the gallery floor, and the series of botanically themed seat cushion designs for an 'imaginary chair' that sits in the gallery space. The chair is said to have been built from a photograph, a jumper and a memory, in response to the anniversary of the death of the partner of one of Beasley's close friends. The mossy, natural tones of the chair and cushion designs take their colour palette from 'The Bedstead'; as Cass says, 'the colours of Ravilious are always the colours of the natural environment, but not wild nature; it's a natural environment that cohabits with us'. The garden is the ultimate symbol of this human relationship to and dominion of nature.

This exhibition in many ways raises more questions than it answers. It draws its visitors into new fields of inquiry only to leave them there, more curious yet none the wiser. Yet rather than detracting from 'Ous', it is this mystery that heightens its charm. The surface simplicity of the

artist's individual pieces – such as the French linen cyanotypes and linoleum rays of light – belies a rich world of ideas and a web of themes behind each object. It feels like a walking tour of Beasley's mind as she dismantles Ravilious' painting; we encounter a series of works through which the workings of free association are made manifest. But, as is ever the case with Beasley's work, the artist's thoughts behind the artworks remain shifting and oblique, their true meaning seeming to lie just out of reach.