

## **Please Use the Side Door**

Penelope Curtis

On the front door a notice says that Camden Arts Centre is closed on Mondays. I go around to the side entrance. Things are the wrong way round on Mondays. Though the offices are warm and bright, the galleries upstairs are dark and cold. Jacqui Poncelet puts on her coat to walk me around them.

We stand in the cold empty galleries imagining another exhibition, an exhibition of Jacqui Poncelet and Laura Ford. Poncelet will furnish the walls and floor; Ford will populate these variegated backgrounds with animal and human life. The exhibition is suddenly very much 'in progress'. The planned relationship between wall and floor – with the floor of Gallery I suggesting the wide outdoors; the walls in Gallery II enclosing a domestic interior – has to be turned around.

Gallery I is naturally lit, and currently hung with photographs on white walls. Gallery II is showing a video works, but they are now switched off, the walls are black and the screens are blank. We stand, looking out at the gallery walls, projecting imagery onto them creating scenes as backdrops. The walls, which are full, will be empty; the floor, which is empty, will be full. I figure the walls as promising illusory exits, leading the eye every which way. Vistas open up, only to close. Entrances are blocked – up. Exit is barred.

I last saw Laura Ford's animals in her studio. Like much of her work, all but one of the animals was 'blind', muffled in something of a protective blanket. Now they are wrapped again, covered in plastic in one of the galleries storage rooms. It is hard not to read their plight as sadder than ever, and I pick my way around them, searching for their features through sheeting. Even the determinedly lively aspect of the five little girls (who's chintz covering similarly masks their eyes) is stilted by the plastic wrap. In December they will all be let out, allowed to find their places in the exhibition, by sense if not by sight.

The last (and only) time Poncelet and Ford showed together, their work was added to an already densely furnished Victorian parlour. There Poncelet's paintings jostled for attention with the patterns of William Morris and Purkin, and with the eclectic juxtapositions of Victorian needlework and natural history collections. Ford's bears and rabbits indulged in a purposive yet fruitless game in the room's darker recesses.

What seemed then to be a natural match will now be tested in the empty spaces of the modern art gallery. What was it that made Ford and Poncelet fit together? It must be more than the fact that each has sustained a long interest in the making and appropriating pattern, and that one occupies foreground and one the backdrop, adding life to the others empty spaces. It must be more than the fact that Ford's creatures turn a literally blind eye to the works by Poncelet which are all about seeing but almost unseeable. What does each add to the other? What is the sum of the two parts?

Ford provides us with acutely graphic renditions of human emotion, mental and

physical. Her imagery is all about remembering and giving memory clarity. Poncelets work on the other hand is without emotion. It records, but is impossible to remember, and far from having defined outlines, is endless. Memory comes up against amnesia. But though Ford offers us character, the animal makes no connection with me. The girls dance on regardless. They are as removed from their viewer as Poncelet's anonymous banks of information. The fragment is allowed endlessly to reproduce itself, thereby acquiring order and pattern where none was meant. This is democracy run amok, in which hierarchy is absolutely denied. Both Ford and Poncelet offer us something familiar, but their self-contained reconfigurations leave us strangely impotent, unable to exercise choice or judgment. Poncelet's memory is generous to a fault, offering everything and nothing. Ford's is so resolutely resolved that it was only be hers. Each might be positioned at either end of a spectrum of Natural Selection.

I imagine vistas and arcades opening and closing accross Poncelet's walls. I imagine her floor as a psychedelic dream landscape, a changeable sea in which we try to read the patterns of currents. I imagine objects balanced on or against these horizons. She provides the uncertain, elastic space against which Ford's concrete trophies are balanced. I see myself as Alice in Wonderland, arriving at a scene at once familiar and strange, but where my presence makes little difference. Camouflage induces claustrophobia. Jacqui says good bye. I didn't see her go, but she must have gone through the side door. Shortly afterwards I follow her.