

Michael Landy, *Nourishment*

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Michael Landy was last seen in *Break Down*, as a foreman in a disused Oxford Street department store housing a production line that disassembled, cut up and then ground into powder all his possessions, including his stock of unsold works of art. He is still living in the wake of this event, explaining to me that he is wearing a jacket given to him by Gillian Wearing, shoes given to him immediately after *Break Down* by one of its financiers, Karsten Schubert, and Tracey Emin's socks. We are talking in the stark space of Interim Art's upper gallery where, floating at generous distances from one another on its spotless walls are delicate, obsessively detailed etchings of uprooted weeds, themselves floating in the midst of broad expanses of fine white paper. It seems, to say the least, a long way from *Break Down* to this new show, *Nourishment*.

Break Down left Landy without possessions and without art work to sell at the very moment when, given the success of the event, demand would have been at its highest. There was a crass plan to bag up the granulated remains of his possessions for sale but such an act would have cut against the whole purpose of the event, which was after all to highlight the system of consumerism and get its viewers to ask how much their sense of themselves is bound up with what they own. So Landy had the residue, nearly six tons of it, buried at a landfill site. The artist, interestingly, does not think that his act of sacrifice and disposal has altered him much personally.

It is not quite true to say that *Break Down* left Landy with nothing, for he had kept a database of his disposed-of goods. He has since worked on completing and publishing an inventory of his 7,227 ex-possession, detailing, numbering and classifying everything from the valuable components of his well-known 1990 show *Market* to an empty crisp packet (salt and vinegar flavour).

A constant strand in Landy's work is just that single-minded and uncompromising focus on what he undertakes, whether it is the methodical cataloguing of everything he owns or the decision to make life-size etchings of weeds which would record all the detail that he could discern, and had him poring over plants and the etching plates for months, and for as long as the daylight held out (twelve hours a day, he says, in the summer).

The results are finely rendered prints which systematically record every twist of root, bristle on stem and capillary hair on leaf. They seem to encourage two types of viewing; from a distance of a few feet, appreciating the overall shape of the grey masses against the paper, and taking in the structure of the weed, from flowers to root; and from a few inches, marvelling at the extraordinary level of detail. From a distance, certainly, they have a conventional aesthetic appeal but closer up they contain a subtle surprise as, despite the abstracting force of monochrome and uniform lines on paper, the collection of bristles, thorns and wilting leaves hints not at aesthetic order but at the weed's defences, grubbiness and decay. Or, in other words, the view from a distance suggests Ruskin's moral and ordered view of nature, while up close one's nose is in uncomfortable proximity to a pavement or back lot in Bethnal Green.

For Landy, weeds are not just weeds. *Nourishment* is the reverse side of Landy's major installation *Scrapheap Services* (purchased by the Tate) in which, with a similarly labour-intensive process that involved cutting thousands of little figures out of drink-cans, many of which were fed through a mechanical shredder, he commented on the fate of those considered surplus to the clean and orderly running of society. Like the shopping trolleys and crates used in his previous work to build sculptural installations, weeds are common but overlooked objects. Landy speaks eloquently about their names, neglected histories, supposed medicinal qualities and the meanings that people used to attach to them: Canadian Fleabane hitched a boat-ride across the Atlantic to colonise these shores; Oxford Ragwort jumped the wall of the city's Botanical Gardens to run wild, and hybridised with the native species; the building of the railways granted mobility to plants as much as people; the pods of Shepherd's Purse look like what it is named after but the plant was also called 'Mother's Heart' since they would burst open revealing red tissue when pressed with the fingers. It becomes clear, then, that while the etchings stick very closely to what could be seen, the depicted weeds act metaphorically, standing in for the urban underclass, similarly mobile, mongrel and diasporic, and also the subject of prolonged neglect and spasmodic measures of control, or weeding. In what Landy says is an idealisation of weeds, their survival, spread and fertility takes on a political complexion.

Just as the etchings look quite different when viewed from near and far, in another way they have a double character: in one sense, they are conventional, decorative and saleable works—Landy is open about needing the money and *Nourishment* is a title that smartly refers to the weeds' striving for survival along with the artist's. Yet read in another register, as

conceptual pieces, the prints are not merely long laboured-over but are traces of an extended, private performance, a romantic homage to that which is trodden underfoot.

In a final and surely conscious twist, Landy uprooted the weeds so as to idealise and depict them, keeping them alive as best he could over the many days it took to etch them in such detail. Finally, of course, they died, and traces of their decay can clearly be read in the prints. Yet the weeds seem to float against the pure white of the paper as though they were ascending, their roots trailing in the air. So these colourless weeds take on a ghostly or spiritual air, and the lethal act of representation, of making beautiful and eternal is a price paid for with life itself.

Michael Landy: Nourishment is at Interim Art until 26th January.
Michael Landy, *Break Down Inventory*, Ridinghouse, London 2001.