

HUNGER ARTIST

Kate Gottgens

Ashraf Jamal

Like their daily bread, their own bile,
thinness entered all lives here early;
it was what they had instead of history;
these winds that leave the soil all sand,
the perennial suburbs that peter out,
and a bric-a-brac of lives, rich alone

In their great longings, their bleak lusts.

Stephen Watson – The Other City

DAILY BREAD

Famine is at the centre of Franz Kafka's story, 'The Hunger Artist'. We see a man in a cage whose gift to the world is the power to starve himself. In the beginning a morbid fascination prevails, the public, gluttoned, in awe of a man who, wilfully, addictively, negates the pleasures of the flesh. The man's self-inflicted hunger, however, carries no mystical or spiritual freightage – he seeks only to be seen as a triumphal master of self-negation. Until, in the end, the twist arrives, the public loses interest, spurred on by yet another freak-show, leaving the man deprived of that which he desires most – a witness. He finally dies, barely visible in his caged bed of straw, his final moments bolstered faintly by the memory that, despite the redundancy of his actions in the eyes of society, still, as life withers, he never lost his powers of self-impoverishment.

By turning hunger into an art form Kafka alights upon society's vicarious obsession with deprivation- as-spectacle. Marina Abramovic springs to mind as the contemporary artist who has made austerity her crucible and wager. So it would seem, despite Kafka's conclusion that 'everywhere, as if by secret agreement, a positive revulsion from profound fasting was in evidence', that we remain hooked to the spectacle of hunger.

But what exactly is this fascination? It is a form of attrition? Is hunger the body's memory? To what extent are we dealing with materiality – the desire for things – and the fear of their extinction? And how do we, bodily, imaginatively, psychically manage the very crux of life that is hunger?

As Sharman Apt Russell notes, 'Hunger is a country we enter every day like a commuter across a friendly border. We wake up hungry. We endure that for a matter of minutes before we break our fast'. And so the cycle of lack and satiation repeats itself. 'You are built to be hungry and you are built to withstand hunger. You know exactly what to do', Russell declares. But do we?

Is the cycle of lack-desire-satisfaction as easily rounded? Or is this lack, this desire, this gratification never truly causally linked, but, rather, peripatetically, randomly, obsessive-compulsively – addictively. How else are we to explain the classic instance of an addictive post-industrial culture than through 'burnout' – that extinction of the very flame of life, that reduction of a human being to a gutted husk?

As Josh Cohen notes in his essay, 'Minds Turned to Ash', 'the exhaustion experienced in burnout combines an intense yearning for the state of completion with the tormenting sense that it cannot be attained'. Therefore, satiation is, in fact, impossible. As that anorexic embodiment of hunger who, legend has it, would intravenously filtrate his body with fresh blood, Mick Jagger, famously crowed – 'can't get no satisfaction, no, no, no'.

Hunger, therefore, is inescapable, and its apocalyptic fallout, famine, inevitable. Its root is not only material but connected to a 'melancholic world-weariness' which, as Cohen points out, stretches back many centuries. 'All is vanity!' we read in Ecclesiastes, 'What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?' Galen and Hippocrates are early diagnosticians of this melancholic world weariness. In medieval theology it appears under the sign – acedia – 'a listless indifference to worldly life brought about by spiritual exhaustion'. In the Renaissance it is Albrecht Durer's engraving, 'Melancholia 1', which summarised the mind's dark tug.

While in our hyper-exhaustive and exhausting culture, in which dissatisfaction and overweening ambition form a Janus-faced norm, the toll on our bodies and

minds cannot, as yet, be deduced. For ours is the age of famine, and here it is not the bloated starved urchin avariciously scoped by vultures which proves the index, but the very rage that is Capital.

Our inheritance is a life catatonic yet febrile, listless yet uninterrupted, in which each and every drug, be it religion, the work ethic, sex, or Damien Hirst's pharmaceutical emporia, which are the opiates we mainline. For us there is no tranquillity, no still point in this churning world, but the unending withering of mind and body by a grail we know we cannot reach. Burnout is our norm, famine our daily bread. And what better place to enshrine this hollowed truth than in the 21st century's most fetishized exhibit for our ills - the art gallery.

It is there that we go to confront the impossibility of our existence, there that we find the ghosting of our drained lives. For the gallery is not a sanctified place of silence and rumination but a place of horror wherein our very excesses are championed. The art gallery is the temple for the gutted and burnt imagination. And so, for all the talk of the art gallery as a place of instruction, civility, refined order, it now emerges as none other than a murder factory – a butcher shop, a concentration camp - or for those like Nicholas Serota, the mandarin behind the world's greatest gallery, the Tate Modern, a glee-stricken raucous pleasure dome in which hunger reigns unappeased and desired all the more - feverishly witnessed, revisited again and again.

For as Cohen witheringly notes, 'You feel burnout when you've exhausted all your internal resources, yet cannot free yourself of the nervous compulsion to go on regardless. Life becomes something that won't stop bothering you'. It is this itch that sticks. 'Among its most frequent and oppressive symptoms is chronic indecision, as though all the possibilities and choices life confronts you with cancel each other out, leaving only an irritable stasis'.

THINNESS

Kate Gottgens is South Africa's master hunger artist. No one has better conveyed the crack and the hollow that fissures and empties experience. 'Panic', 'Rattle', 'Psychotropics', 'Xanax', 'Bromide Beach', 'Dance Dance Dance', 'Interior: Horns' are the names affixed to paintings jaundiced, blank, emptied of any secret. Instead what we get is an anaemic truth, a world, or worlds, intergenerational, ground down by the fury of living. For many these are perceived as 'white worlds', as instances of 'white mischief' in Africa, a caste, a class, honed by eugenics and empire – supreme and yet, through the eyes of Gottgens, all too terribly fallible.

Gottgens' genius – there is frankly no other way to name it – stems from an eye drained of any hope. Her worlds are not, however, mere indictments of folly, but visions austere, vanquished, lost. In conversation Gottgens speaks of 'a loosening of connection to the body', of lives churned, fallow, drought-stricken. Her 'white boys' are dyslexic, anxious, fraught, clueless, mortally struck down by anxiety. Each and every painting, she says, is an echo of Edvard Munch's 'Scream', though in Gottgens' world no howl reverberates. Unlike Munch, who hollowed out the world with a human cry, for Gottgens there is no echo, no mirror or foil for human pain. Heedless to any existential crisis, Gottgens' earth – all too suburban – is as mute, as tone-deaf, as dull as the hollowed murmur of its occupants. We see a group of teenagers in fancy dress at a matric dance, champagne bottles in hand, 'wasted'. Or a drunken 'jackass' cavorting at a party. Or a woman – the reversed echo of a photograph by Billy Monk – passed out on a red velvet sofa, her skin phosphorescently aglow, as if embalmed in a body stocking. Whether old or young – and in Gottgens' world age becomes immaterial – what seeringly stands out is that all lives, all of life, has come a cropper. Misfortune is everywhere. However it is not a misfortune one declaims or howls, but one that creeps across the picture plane. It is there in the bloated odalisque on a li-lo, in the broken scribble of a floating man, the blank-faced bespectacled boy on a ledge, the nocturnal teenagers in a porta-pool which for Gottgens recalls an animal 'pen'.

Temperamentally Gottgens shares much with the South African artworld's great misanthrope, Jane Alexander, except that Gottgens will not hide behind the horror show she presents. There is nothing enigmatic in Gottgens' paintings – her worlds are not runes or screens but naked truths which stand disembowelled, raw, exposed. In this regard Gottgens is that utterly modern creature – the millennial – for whom there is no shelter, no 'skin', no 'boundary' because of its unceasing, ceaseless, 'exposure through media'.

It is this exposure, this glutted and unrelenting connectedness, which for Gottgens has voided this world of any secret or mystery. Therein, or rather on its vacuous surface, we, the pleasure-seekers, have turned Xanax into our Xanadu. And for Gottgens the quintessence of this leeches and leeching emptiness is Las Vegas, a 'bling bling bling land on steroids'.

It is clear, as we chatted in her studio in Hout Bay, that Gottgens' paintings are powerfully informed by that ever-glittering land of 'SUV's and aircon'. However, before we conclude that Gottgens is merely a voyeur, we should remember the more that her world is as powerfully defined by the emptiness right here, in the mother city of Cape Town whose barren teat, like Lady Macbeth's, is utterly drained of succour.

No one has better described this city in words than the late poet and essayist Stephen Watson. In 'A version of Melancholy', penned in 1989, Watson describes the Southeaster as a malevolent force that can 'shift the day slightly off-centre', a country – South Africa – in which 'thinness', 'threadbareness', shapes 'the extempore character of almost all man-made structures', of 'the loose warp and woof of all textures, natural or cultural, that underscores the absurdity of our projects, existential or otherwise'.

It is this threadbareness, this thinness, which has profoundly shaped Gottgens' project. It is not surprising that she should dub her latest outing 'famine', for it is this starved-yet-voracious eco-system, this toe-hold on Africa, which for Gottgens epitomises the vainglorious fantasy of occupation. No one in Gottgens' world possesses any security of place or being. Rather each surfaces as an addendum, an accident, shot-through with the acute sense, after Watson, 'of there being something unreliable, left out, without confirmation, in the culture as a whole'. 'Theirs is the melancholia of the inner émigré, of those who know they have lost and will always lose in the battle to shape the kind of Africa they would prefer to live in'.

However to assume that this existential reflux is peculiarly one suffered in an ex-colonial outpost is to suppose that Gottgens' world is solely defined by empire. This would be a profoundly limiting view, for Gottgens' world, which in truth is post-existential, outer-bodied, mediatised, is all the more significantly honed-and-emptied by global Capital. Her failed leisure-seekers, addicts, sloths, party animals, are the products of an 'aboriginal blankness', a disconnection as psychically alarming as it is ineradicable. For hers, after Watson, is a 'desolation which we cannot plumb but which is fundamental for that reason'.

Gottgens' 'famine' is the kind one experiences in shopping malls, at banquets, at ceremonies as funereal as they are gleeful. It is a famine which can never be slaked. Her ability to convey this famine in paintings as threadbare, as thin, as inalienably parched and drained of any guiding will stands as a profound testimony to human despair in the face of a vacuum. She is the greatest and surest diviner of this drought-stricken wasteland, our land-locked mariner who, after Samuel Taylor Coleridge, bears witness to a terrible truth – 'water water everywhere but not a drop to drink'.
