

The unexpected Hollywood hit *Wall-e*, an animated film from 2008, provides an intriguing twist to the theme of post-apocalypticism so common in popular culture globally. In it, humans haven't been destroyed or subjugated by the usual suspects, mutants, aliens or robots, all, like their originals in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, manifestations of man's hubristic desire to become divine. Instead, they have simply left the planet on an extended and pointless space journey after 'trashing' it. Left behind on earth, a small waste-cleaning robot continues its equally pointless task amidst a devastation it cannot possibly master.

But this meaningless function turned into a ritual makes *Wall-e* just like the human beings who have departed for their lifelong party in space, its robotic character serving to anthropomorphise rather than dehumanise it. Like Robinson Crusoe on his desert isle, *Wall-e* also comes to represent the future of humanity, as if it were starting the species anew on a planet forsaken by men who have themselves become robots. Only once human beings have disappeared, can their robotic creation rewind the story of homo sapiens and begin anew, with *Wall-e* discovering a plant growing among the debris of a completely non-organic planet.

While the narrative of *Wall-e* can only and necessarily be experienced in anthropomorphic terms, its post-apocalyptic theme is not understood in any conventional way through the lens of extinction, real or possible, since human beings have merely left earth on an elongated vacation. And is it not always the case, after all, that human creations like mutants, robots, vampires and the like exhibit the truth of the species more fulsomely than their makers or originals? The anthropomorphism of the film, in other words, does not smuggle human beings back into the story as ghostly presences but simply replaces them.

I wanted to begin this essay with *Wall-e* because, unlike the apocalyptic visions in which extinction or subjugation loom large as latter-day versions of divine punishment, whether in the figures of atomic or ecological devastation, Apnavi Makanji's work deals with humanity's handiwork as a set of destructive traces, but in such a way that in it man has disappeared without having been destroyed. Like all post-apocalyptic visions, it is fundamentally concerned with time, but not in the theological way in which rapture or transcendence is at play through destruction. Temporality is rather manifested as confusion or uncertainty in her work.

Like some post-war landscape where the distinction between structures half-built and half-destroyed isn't clear, Makanji's body of work returns incessantly to the undecidable point between the unfinished and the decaying. We are catapulted into a world where heavily detailed painting peters out into tentative sketches, or remnants of organic matter such as fish-tails are joined up with inorganic and unidentifiable waste. Sometimes small shrubs emerge from dead matter like fungi. At other times her images appear to be in the throes of some mysterious metamorphosis, whether by way of growth or disintegration, bringing together life and death, animal and mineral into an illegible whole.

But it is more than time's directionality that is put into question in Makanji's non-theological vision, which by that token refuses human narratives of divine chastisement and redemption. Also uncertain in her world of simultaneous growth and decay is the very

materiality of what we see. In her series 'Drawing Breath', for example, one has to squint to notice that one part of an image is a collage, and tracing the jointure between this material and the sketch into which it devolves means involving senses other than sight. In her earlier work, then, the imagination of and desire for touch is required to trace the indistinct joining of cut-out and pencil-work. And this forces the viewer to cease relying upon the 'cleanliness' of sight alone.

In the works for this exhibition, Makanji takes her criticism of sight further by requiring viewers to pick up and smell different samples of soil dampened to release their fragrance by clinically-applied drops of water. Both the sense of touch and odour involve a certain physical awkwardness and even distaste if not suspicion inspired by questions like: what will I feel? Might I damage the artwork? What if the experience is unpleasant? It is as if Makanji wants to force the viewer to relinquish any sense of mastery, with its corollaries in detachment and cleanliness, even the aesthetic experience of wonderment and recognition being displaced by discomfort and uncertainty.

The memory that is ostensibly invoked by the scent of clinically-decanted earth in the exhibition's installations is not simply a way of inhabiting the artist's persona, shifting with her between Geneva and Mumbai. Nor is it about imagining one's own experience of the past. It also has to do with an awareness of passage and of passing away—of the waste product left behind by one's handiwork mixed up with dead animal or vegetal matter in apparently pristine Geneva as much as squalid and teeming Mumbai. This is not, therefore, some version of Proust's remembrance of things past, coarsened through innumerable literary and artistic renditions of exile or diaspora by NRIs and their children in Europe and America.

The memory at play in Makanji's works, both visual and olfactory, seems to be one not of pleasing or nostalgic recognition but estrangement. For like all waste, whose primary and extreme form is excrement, what is most intimate about our handiwork is also what is alien and even shocking to us. Having been exiled from the scene by not being represented as subjects in her work, we are compelled by Makanji to recognize ourselves in our own dead, decaying and newly germinating products. But this results not in any reconciliation with it, but an experience of its strangeness and so our own as well. Like a pet dog whose nose is rubbed into its excrement to toilet-train it, we are made to recognise our foreignness in its ecological by-product.

And yet this experience possesses an aesthetic dimension that is neither ugly nor unpleasant. For in Makanji's work, like in *Wall-e*, we are allowed to experience what Alan Weisman's best-selling book about ecological catastrophe calls *The World Without Us*. The imaginary experience of extinction or disappearance invoked by such works so easily becomes pleasurable not only because of its novelty, but also because it mimics the purported experience of a distant and omniscient divinity observing its creation's ruination. And it is to escape this recourse and even imperative to divinity that Makanji repudiates the vision of our own destruction and its overpowering sense of transcendence, something familiar in our day in the figure of the suicide-bomber.

In some sense the suicide-bomber represents the individualized form of humanity's experience of its own destruction in the register of the sublime. And like its collective forms in man's atomic or environmental apocalypse, the suicide-bomber, too, often invokes these now-stereotyped global threats, of which his own act represents, perhaps, the illusion of control and individual agency that their great conflagrations lack. But if the suicide-bomber's remains are ignored for his video-taped testament and the virtual immortality of his youthful body, Makanji's focus on indecipherable and metastasising waste forces our attention back to our own remains in a non-transcendent way. Its beauty is born, then, out of the very uncertainties and loss of direction of the world without us.

Like Wall-e, we have become robots, our own left-behind creations performing futile rituals of virtue (like recycling) in the face of an imponderable disaster. But it is in our waste products, not some necessarily theological vision of a pristine future, itself only a version of the pristine past, that we shall find life and love. Makanji wills us to re-inhabit the world through its waste and our own. This is not to aestheticize such by-products of human action, since the processes of touching and smelling that she conjures do exactly the opposite as we have seen. Instead in the exhibition's film we see the recombination of organic and inorganic forms swept together by the random actions of time, tide and wind.

We are mute spectators of our everyday afterlife seen on the edges of sea and lake, in Makanji's sinuous yet disjointed images of sand, rubbish, effluent, discarded fish-parts, crow's feathers and remains. Connecting these quotidian experiences of waste and its recombination to the great ecological crises of our planet, she allows us to see the beauty in our own afterlife—the life of our by-products that continues without us in unplanned and unexpected metastases and metamorphoses. Beautiful about this series of random recombination is precisely our inadvertent involvement in them. Yet this is an experience neither of humanity's demise nor its consequently godly transcendence, but merely one of letting ourselves go and so becoming part of a kind of denatured or second nature.