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Time and again in the photographs and films of Hannah Collins one encounters a paradox regarding the arts of travel and arrival. ‘My journeys have just a skeletal intention,’ she has written, ‘I experience a lightness that I never feel at home.’ This lightness is in her work too: a delicately conceptual and sometimes humorous play with objects, places and the image itself. But a kind of weight insists also, a density of concentration on object or scene. You could say, too easily, that this quality derives from composition and style: the way that some of Collins’s photographs fill the gaze, metres wide, or cram the field of the picture with things and textures that threaten to overflow. But her work is intimate and immersive in other ways too; if Collins is a traveller, it’s in the mode of a *travelling shot* — this is literally the mode of her film *Solitude and Company* (2008) — moving ever deeper and closer to a subject that remains somehow poised and not quite known.

Consider the photographic works she made in Hackney in the 1980s, when her methods frequently involved annexing to the studio items discovered near at hand in the not-yet-regenerated east end of London. ‘My aim was to create a momentary place or a real-life scale. The temporary combinations seemed to liberate each from its origins.’ In *Grapes* (1989) a wobbly tower of balloons describes a cartoonish rendering of a bunch of grapes. In *Family* (1988) an arrangement of dilapidated-looking speaker cabinets composes a comically formal group portrait; the objects have been borrowed from a club next door, but they inhabit the studio as if it were a domestic space. Home, in fact, is a recurring subject in these early works. *Thin Protective Coverings II* (1987) shows an expanse of cardboard boxes opened out to cover floor and part of a wall behind, where they meet large sheets of transparent plastic. The stuff of temporary dwellings constructed by the homeless expands to remake the studio, opening it up to the world outside the

photograph. (It's a feature of many of Collins's photographs, this sense that the subject does not stop at the edges of the image.)

The word 'liminal' is too frequently applied to works of art that involve incomplete translations from one medium or milieu to another, or which explore real places at the edges or frontiers of geopolitical safety and privilege. With Collins the journey to the edge is only part of the point of her travels; what also matters is the quality of attention and immersion that occurs there — it is never enough merely to note the extremity of a place or a way of life, the artist must also extract something more ambiguous, formally and conceptually taxing, from it. The first such journey for Collins was to Istanbul, a city that seemed to her, in such photographs as *Signs of Life, Istanbul* (1992), with its crumbling and patched-up factory walls, to exist in a condition of ruination and accretion at the same time. Collins lived in Spain for many years, and on the outskirts of Barcelona she made *La Mina* (2001-04), a complex multiscreen film that involved her deeply in the gypsy culture that had been there for centuries. Such journeys require levels of intimacy and collaboration that have only been heightened in her most recent work.

You can witness the delicacy and danger of this engagement very clearly in *The Fertile Forest*, Collins's series of photographs of medicinal plants taken (mostly) deep in the rainforest of the Amazon basin. The Ticuna, Inga and Cofan people with whom Collins travelled know thousands of such species: 'As I walked further with them through the forest I began to appreciate the environment as a three-dimensional presence. Plants hung from the great height of the trees. The flowers revealed their presence with fallen petals. Ferns and creepers spread along the ground or nestled in rotting trunks.' As Collins tells it the process of being led to these plants was an education in a new type of looking. The resulting photographs often show clearly which plant is to be looked at, but frequently the object of attention is ambiguous or unclear, and forest lushness fills the picture with the same enigmatic force that cardboard and balloons and borrowed

speakers did in Collins's early work. These photographs confront us with our own lack of skill and knowledge at precisely the moment they immerse us in the scene. There must be another kind of knowing, they suggest: exact but hallucinatory.

As regards Collins the traveller, there is perhaps no more exposing nor risky journey than into the work of another artist, and especially one whose own immersive excursion to the edge of things is or was so resonant. The African-American artist Noah Purifoy, whose exhibition *66 Signs of Neon* repurposed detritus from the Watts riots of 1965, and who was subsequently a pivotal figure in the nexus of art, education and civic duty in California, relocated to the Mojave Desert where he constructed over a hundred sculptural and installation works. Collins's photographs frame these works — a homage to Frank Gehry in corrugated metal, a wooden lattice based on a gallows from the Clint Eastwood western *Hang 'Em High* — with expanses of desert and sky that recall the great American landscape photographers and the interiors of Walker Evans, whose 1966 book *Message From the Interior* provides a container for smaller reproductions Collins's images of Purifoy's desert assemblages.

Accompanying the eighteen large-scale prints themselves are the artist's recorded interviews with figures associated with Purifoy and his first politically forceful and visible work. Among these, the artist John Outterbridge voices an astonishing metaphor for the predicament of African Americans in the wake of Watts, though it might also be an image for any artist's proximity and distance from his or her subject: 'We had no nation, we had no heart. Though, a lot of times you would take it out, and it would still be beating, and you would ask: "Could you use this? You want it? I don't have any use for it."'

Brian Dillon's books include *The Great Explosion* (Penguin, 2015), *Objects in This Mirror: Essays* (Sternberg, 2014) and *Ruin Lust* (Tate, 2014). His writing has appeared in

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