

# THE BROOKLYN RAIL

## NOVEMBER 2022

### RANDY WRAY: *TRAVELOGUE*

by Andrew Paul Woolbright



Randy Wray, *Plot Device*, 2022. Oil on linen, 52 x 28 inches. Courtesy the artist and 15 Orient. Photo: Daniel Greer.

Randy Wray's solo exhibition *Travelogue* at 15 Orient dredges the depths of where things originate and the phantom zones where cells split and entities emerge. Wray's ability to avoid semblance and reduction prioritizes specific but undisclosed sources, creating distinct shapes that defer recognition. Hovering in the protean spaces that can simultaneously suggest the interiors of bodies, bones, plants, and tools, Wray's practice stays in the apeiron, presiding over the final moment where forms resist determination and luxuriating in the mutable recognition of shadows. The paintings and sculptures share the queerness of quarks, shedding interpretations between bio matter, X-ray scans, landscapes, and pure formal abstractions, while engaging in a metaphysical unknowing and unlearning; most significantly, they expand the tension and bond between what is living and dead.

The spectrum of life and death provides the range of the exhibition, but ultimately it is the cross section that figures itself as the mechanism in the paintings. Wray commits to the layers and strata of distinct yet unrecognizable shapes by exploring them through vivisections, revealing their hollowed out and transparent overlays. In *Accidental Implant* (2022), the off-white shape could be a bone hovering above cerebral matter, but just as easily the shapes can be interpreted as petals. In *Plot Device* (2022) the central shape burns with the color of realgar. It could be an organ, with atriums and aorta, but its distinct edges make it rigid, possibly suggesting something more akin to sacrum and coccyx. Somehow Wray develops and combines silhouettes that suggest contradictions and unresolved zones of life—the moments of drift between arteries and hedge apple trees, strange durians and fossils, inedible fruits. The plant canker may provide a useful metaphor, and its strange articulations feel present in some of Wray's paintings, the accumulation of dead tissue and mass that grows but doesn't live, implies a life and previous purpose that is now left inert and static, yet it blooms in its own dark ways. His wavering, and the peculiarity it releases, is his power. Wray's negative capability seems to locate the moment of cellular expression, when signal cascades that shape things into form and express binding phenotypes; but just as easily, the language could exist within the settling of dreams, the sublime apeiron, the metaphysical hammer space that closes off

the nothing and allows for the becoming. Wray wanders between husk and bloom, seed and tomb.

Wray paints without solvents, treating the oil like a sculptural material through a slow process of building up, scraping, and scumbling into the canvas. It's a language of spreading, rubbing, and removing. *Improv Manifesto* and *Unscheduled Sunrise* (both works 2022) have the presence of breakthroughs in Wray's practice; both introduce a range of textures in autumnal tones while configuring space and density in a series of stacks and chambers. Both conjure in materiality, sanding and scraping until the surface of the painting becomes its own skin, catching and reflecting light differently and negotiating the interpenetration of space. At times, the materiality of the surface is a mortar-like thickness after Dubuffet's hautes pâtes, and at others it is worn and rubbed down into deep grooves, leaving crazing and pinching rivulets behind. The artist's dynamism of textures, the spreading and diaphanous mixed with encrusted skins, is another poetics of the boundaries of the living and dead. Something pale and ceruse is holding the color together, turning the palette into moody neutrals that Wray balances with sulphuric burns of heat.

Kept to a room of their own are four paintings, charred or visually embalmed like nature's little corpses, fragments, or fistulae. Terrestrial hunks, gourds, mollusky organs, caked and scraped earthen territories, and the range of shared darkness employed by *Pod* (2020), *Imbue* (2019), *System* (2020), and *Decree* (2019) share a starless fade. Somewhere between junkyard and garden, graveyard and nymphaeum, the work is suspended like the biota of a haunted dream.

The three bronze sculptures in the exhibition give clues to Wray's shape forming and reveal his thinking through material drawing. Without the subterfuge of pictorial space to hide his tracks, Wray incorporates found objects, Bataille-like sensibilities, and base materialism in his process, which confuses growing organic matter with pedestals made of nails, twigs, and detritus, making tool and salvage integral to mass and landscape. In the sculptures, the buttons, nails and screws are tangled in the roots and veins. Collection and accumulation are more readily visible and can be recognized in the surfaces of the painting. The dark, rectangular shape covering the bottom of *Plot Device* has the silhouette of Wray's nearby sculpture, *Model* (2022), giving it the appearance of carrying its shadow.

Wray's extraordinary ability to find the branching points, where something can stray left and become a tree ring or bare right and be a bone or a sun spot, is his practice's elevated language. Whether fistule or petal, jaw bone or stem, acorns, stems, tumors, and buds, Wray drifts non-hierarchically through organic matter with an ethereal alien subjectivity. It all lingers, resisting semblance, carried over from a place that doesn't ask for any resolution. The work remains stored in our minds in the same places where sunsets and eclipses are, where we discern the shapes of shadows and find our steps before the sun rises.