To encounter a thistle seed - to glimpse it floating tipily in a sunbeam, or settling inaudibly on your shirtsleeve - is to encounter nothing out of the ordinary. These plush white pompoms might, in the Victorian language of flowers, denote nobility of character, but they share the same selfish purpose as all reproductive gambits: a lineage continued, a code re-inscribed. And yet, borne on invisible air currents, brushing our cheeks with their downy filaments, they appear to visit us, like pale and weightless epiphanies, from a different and better world. (We might note that in his 1926 poem A Drunk Looks at a Thistle, Hugh MacDiarmid likens these seeds to ‘stars’ flowering in ‘The sterile growth o’ Space’).

Perhaps it is simply their rootless animation, so unusual in plant life, that leads us to read into thistle seeds some hazy suggestion of a divine order, an unmoved mover. In a more robustly religious time, or place, they might not snag so insistently on the parts of us that yearn and wonder. Here and now, though, they appeal to a very contemporary form of deracinated metaphysics, the weak force of feelings unexamined, and of words unsaid. The director of an advertisement for, say, life insurance, or a mobile phone network, would do well to feature a flurry of thistle seeds tumbling through the ether. The casual spirituality they prompt is experienced individually, and bears no relation to the social whole.

In Rupert Ackroyd’s exhibition ‘Cathedral Blocks and Thistle Seeds’, these free-floating objects are introduced into the gallery, in an act of what we might term germinal husbandry. Released at intervals by adapted wall clocks, the delicate spores swoop and hover, their movements influenced by those of visitors to the space, making the work’s precise sculptural configuration an index of its audience’s attention, its given mass and velocity. In contrast to this open system, Ackroyd also presents two further configurations of seeds, enclosed in a pair of vitrines. The first of these takes its form from an architectural feature of the gallery: a weight-bearing column. Within its sealed confines, protected from unpredictable gusts, and subject only to the regular pull of gravity, the seeds are at rest. Bisecting the exhibition space like a wall, the second vitrine has its air warmed by a procession of guttering tea lights. Here - riding the resulting thermals, buffeted by indifferent winds - the white orbs bob and dance, and brush by other objects. One of them, a fragment of fluting from a High Gothic cathedral, testifies to a particular model of faith, which saw medieval masons work on buildings that they knew would only be completed long after their deaths. The other, a mass produced cheese curl snack, testifies to something else, which is not quite the need for corporeal sustenance, but is perhaps close to appetite. Inside this case (a kind of fallow vivarium, its air flavoured with cheese powder), the seeds might touch down, momentarily, on either of their neighbours. If the animating tea lights perhaps suggest votive candles, or ceaselessly flaming sanctuary lamps, then they do without pretention, or any attempt to disguise their material poverty. A bag of tea-lights, after all, might be bought almost as cheaply as a bag of cheese curls - only through inflammatory intention are they elevated, and transformed.

In a final work, Ackroyd has produced foil-rimmed stickers of thistle seeds, cheese curls, and slabs of ecclesiastic masonry, things that are by turns heavy, light, and lighter still. Despite the differences in these motifs, an equivalence is proposed by their shared adhesive backing. Pressed to a surface by an unseen hand, not even the most ethereal of them might rise.

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