

## FOOTNOTES



FOOTNOTES

CANDIDA POWELL-WILLIAMS

# THE VERNACULAR HISTORY OF THE GOLDEN RHUBARB



BY OREN MARGOLIS

After the fall of the Roman empire, the collapse of the aqueducts that had allowed the people of Rome to spread out across the hills and the weakening of international trade networks that had kept the city fed forced the population of the shrinking city to resettle on the low ground in the bend of the Tiber. This area was known as the *abitato*, the inhabited area. But the rest of the vast space inside the walls was inhabited by the ruins of the ancient past. In the Middle Ages, writers seeking to inflame the imaginations of lucrative Christian pilgrims produced collections of *mirabilia*, the ‘wonders’ of the city of Rome, fashioning stories that made sense of the visible past, often with very little regard for accuracy and even plausibility. A city of wonders lent itself to a suspension of disbelief.

Rome is hardly the only place in the world to have such a tradition of storytelling – a tradition of fashioning fanciful, mutable, tententious and often imaginary pasts: Stonehenge was attributed by medieval pseudo-historian Geoffrey of Monmouth to the doings of Merlin the wizard; then, in the seventeenth century, it was reinterpreted by the architect Inigo Jones as a Roman temple – a primitive version of the Tuscan order! But Rome – capital of a world empire, a universal church, and eventually a modern nation-state (to which it has often proved an immense disappointment) – is perhaps unique in the density of its pasts and tales and of its ‘official’ storytellers. Over the years, the city has been viewed and

interpreted by civic chroniclers, ecclesiastical historians, antiquarians, archaeologists, and Grand Tourists. Yet the Rome that the modern visitor encounters, with ancient archaeological remains exposed to the elements, is no more authentic than that of the medieval and early-modern tenements that were in many cases bulldozed so that the ruins would be visible and a different tale could more readily be told.

Candida Powell-Williams is a medieval mirabilia writer in reverse. The writer collected wonders to tell tales; Powell-Williams collects tales to make the wonders. Both need just the barest fragments to construct their fanciful edifices. Tales get jumbled up on top of tales; the signifier mixes with the signified; the spolia of venerable antiquity become just another point of departure. Bernini's elephant and obelisk is mashed up with Hanno, Pope Leo X's ill-fated white elephant, immortalized by Raphael and Giulio Romano and killed by a faulty laxative. Columns come to life, their human anxiety and even despondence seeming to mock Vitruvian principles of beauty, symmetry and order. Nondescript busts of sundry Italian worthies merge with ancient ancestor masks. Yet at the same time as revelling in the absurdity of storytelling and lieux de mémoire, Powell-Williams reaches out to the classical artistic tradition, and even to the twentieth century and Italian artists like Giorgio de Chirico and Arturo Martini. The result is whimsical, irreverent, very often amusing, and no less Roman for it.



FIG. 1



FIG. 1 (1) A giant foot (2) 'The seventeenth-century disease of nostalgia seems to have become a contemporary epidemic' (*The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry, SAGE Publications, 2002, p.95) (3) One obelisk fit perfectly inside the other (4) Everytime he touched the obelisk we blew a whistle (5) 'Tourist sites can be classified in terms of three dichotomies: whether they are an object of the romantic or collective tourist gaze; whether they are historical or modern; and whether they are presented as authentic or inauthentic.' (*The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry, SAGE Publications, 2002, p.94) (6) Roman laxatives included rhubarbs (7) Rhubarbs are herbaceous perennials growing short thick rhizomes for medical purposes with toxic leaves (8) Repeat: Rhubarb Rhubarb Rhuburb Rhubarb Rhubarb Rhubarb (9) Additional props: one party popper and 4 whistles. Blow everytime he touches the obelisk.

FIG. 2

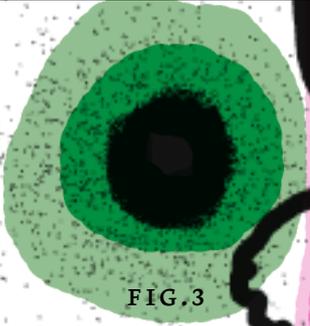


FIG. 3

FIG. 2 (1) I hate snakes so it is lucky I don't use real objects and things (2) Approx 12 hours to coil each pot (3) Listened to *Chances with Wolves* on East Village Radio and *Studio Visit* interviews from Resonance FM (4) Carry a pot carefully for the duration of the visit.



FIG. 3 (1) Silky smooth since 1600s (2) As if carved from stone foot... meets...sausage finger, Guston-esq hand, a sweaty strangers hand, ice cream sticky hand. Blob of ice cream, finger prints, unnatural colouring (3) Rub the toes and touch your nose.

FIG. 4

FIG. 4 (1) The Pope was given an elephant named Hanno. The entire country wanted to catch a glimpse of this amazing beast as there had been no elephants in Rome since the fall of the Roman Empire. He loved this pet so much and would parade through the streets on his back. Sadly Hanno fell ill with suspected constipation. He was given a gold infused laxative which killed him. His body parts (skin, bones, tusks, knees, tongue and penis) were thought to be sent to cardinals across the country but they are actually buried here (2) Roll the rhubarb over the elephant.



FIG. 5

FIG. 5 (1) Mike Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature*, MIT press, 1989 (2) Read: *Manfred*, Lord Byron, 1816 - 1817 (3) The columns are coming to get you (4) I made a lot of work about Pope Joan but decided in the end that she would have to be a work all by herself. (5) My favourite view is through the columns looking at the fountain in the distance and it reminds me of the keyhole on the hill. This keyhole frames the dome to perfection. Cheeks rub away the surface around the hole, shiny, smooth, pinky glow. A keyhole where no key can go. A vista shaped keyhole. And faintly visible, negative space turned positive. And beyond it a box inside of which resides Dan Brown's penis myth.

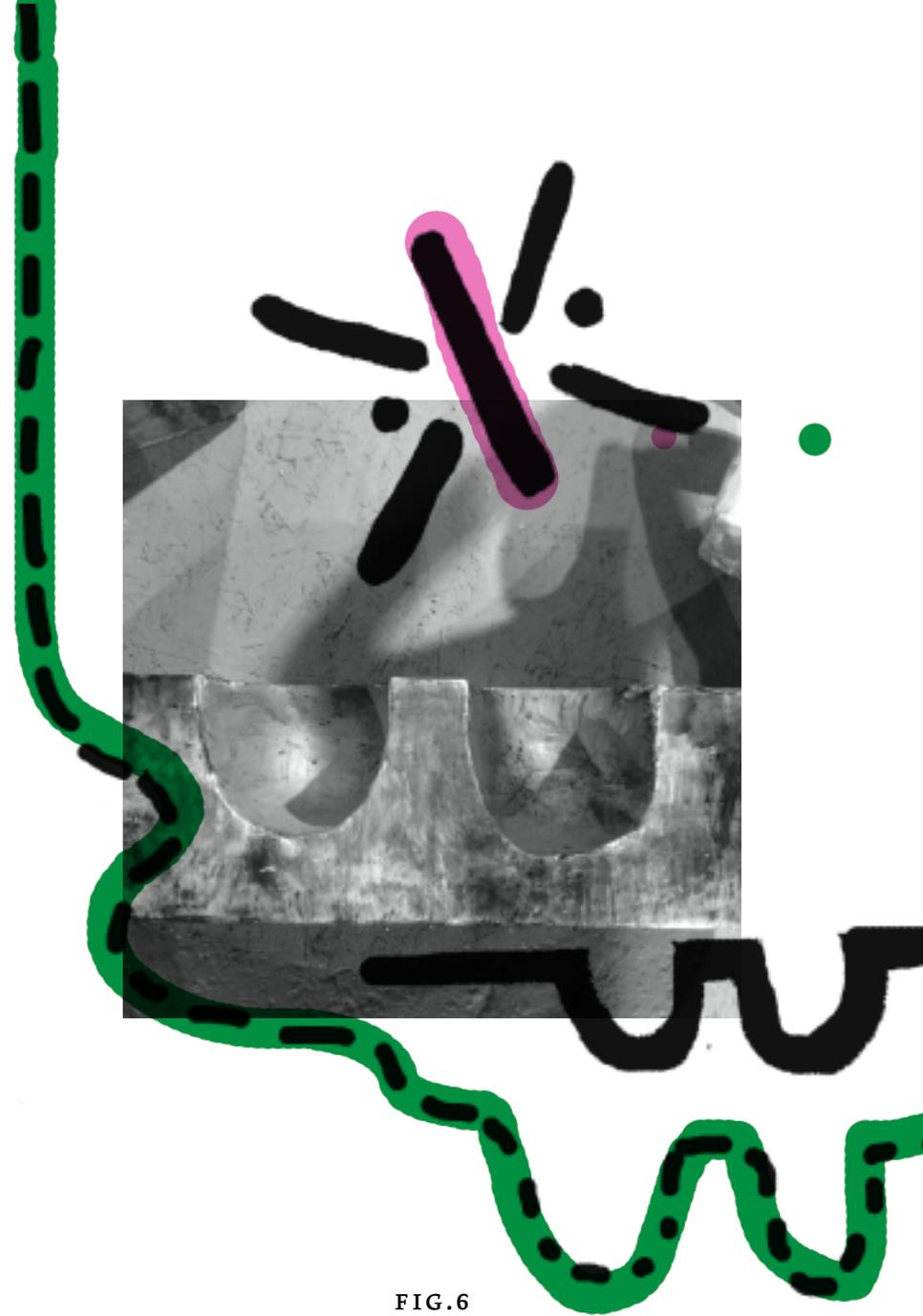


FIG. 6

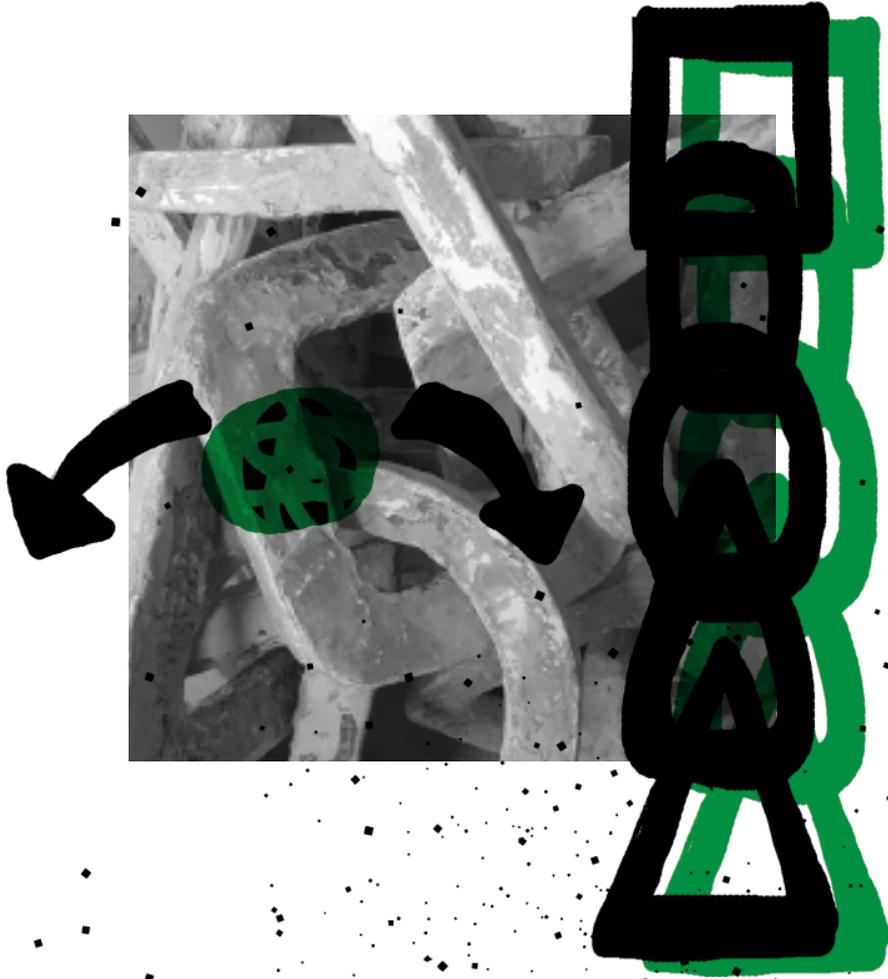


FIG. 6 (1) When I went to the site I didn't go up because I couldn't face going up on my knees (2) Cast plaster (3) Approx 100 x 20 x 20 cm (4) Copycat on your knees (5) Why do we travel?

FIG. 7



FIG. 8

FIG. 7 (1) A square to a triangle via a circle (2) Proteus is a Greek god that could shape shift (3) I made another work about AVATARS look it up (4) Tug of war.

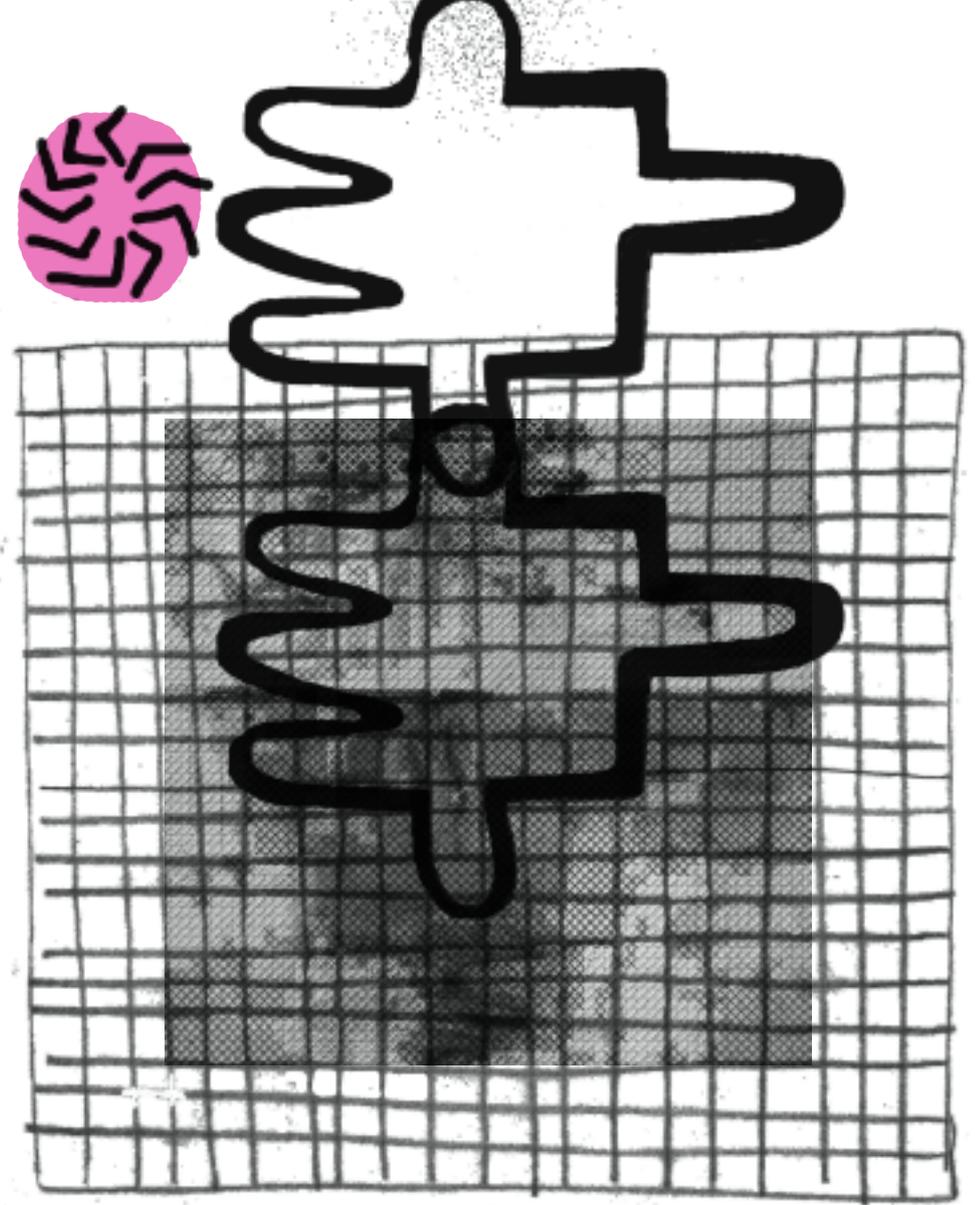


FIG. 8 (1) Long gangly finger-like plumes (2) 'When Sparticus's' army was trapped by the Romans, he gave the impression of having a larger and better organized force than he actually did by tying dead bodies to stakes outside his camp and equipping them with weapons, so that from a distance they looked like sentries'. (*A Cabinet of Roman Curiosities*, J C McKeown, Oxford English Press, 2010, p.36)

FIG. 9

FIG. 9 (1) Geese are very loud and act as better guards than dogs (2) Make a flock of geese (3) 'Kubla Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his. In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy and relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them. There is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening, with the odor of the elephants after the rain and the sandalwood ashes growing cold in the braziers, a dizziness that makes rivers and mountains tremble on the fallow curves of the planispheres where they are portrayed, and rolls up, on after the other, the dispatches announcing to us the collapse of the last enemy troops, from defeat to defeat, and flakes the wax of the seals of obscure kings who beseech our armies' protection, offering in exchange annual tributes of precious metals, tanned hides, and tortoise shell. It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our scepter, that the triumph over enemy sovereigns has made us the heirs of their long undoing. Only in Marco Polo's accounts was Kubla Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing.' (Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, Pan Books, 1972, p.10) (4) 'solemnity, stateliness, scale... "An Elysium of delight"...' (about the gardens of the Villa Borghese where I lived). (*When in Rome*, Matthew Sturgis, Frances Lincoln Limited, 2011, pp.142-143)



FIG. 10



FIG. 10 (1) Cristina fired a canon ball across the city and it landed in this pool (2) This was once the moon made from all the dust of the double UU's (3) Abandon all thought rather than hope (From an inscription at Bomarzo above an open mouth) (4) Its called flip but everyone else calls it fountain of tongues (5) Never (declared Shelley about the Baths of Caracalla) was any desolation more sublime and lovely (6) Pink like the inside of your mouth (7) I did find a penny in the fountain on about day 20. Just the one (8) 'The fame of the object becomes it's meaning' (*The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry, SAGE Publications, 2002, p.118) (9) Watch *Roman Holiday* with Audrey Hepburn then Google Mouth of Truth.

FIG. 11

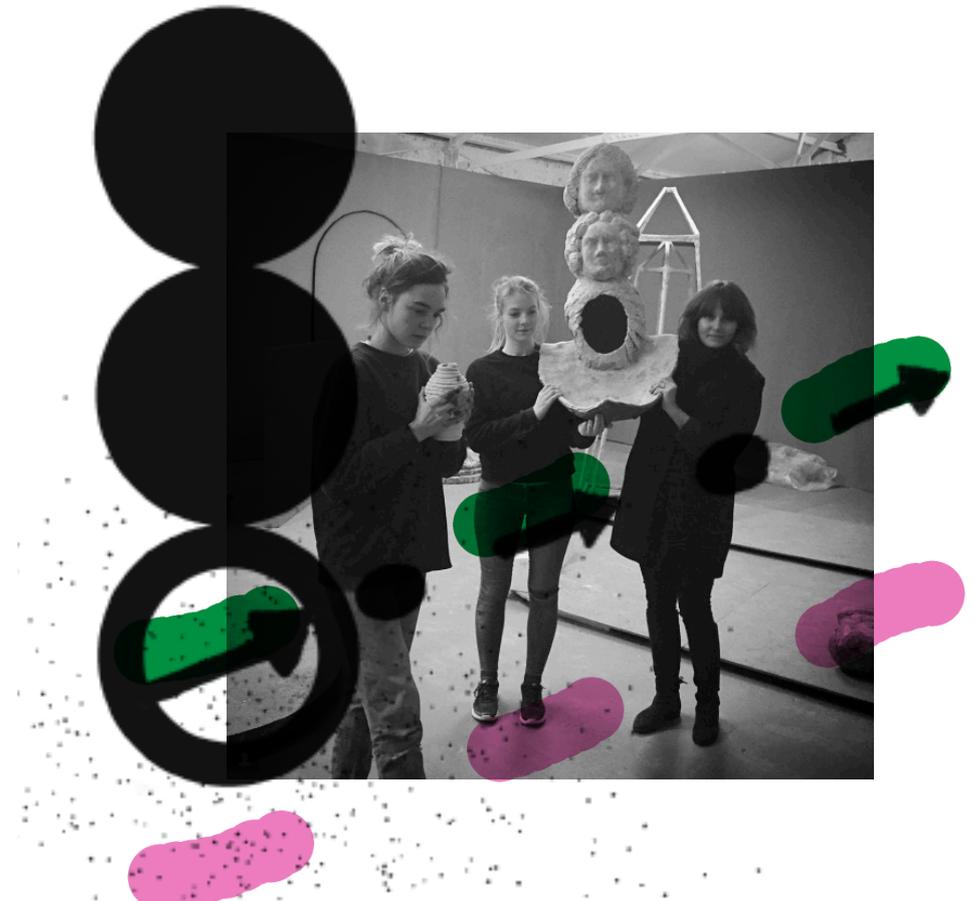


FIG. 11 (1) The least you need to represent a face (2) Roland Barthes has a good essay about Roman hair - it's not really about the beards but its good none the less (3) '... a city that no-one having seen, I can forget. But not because, like other memorable cities, it leaves an unusual image in your recollections. Zora has the quality of remaining in your memory point by point...' (Italo Calvino, *Invisible cities*, Pan Books, 1972, p.16) (4) WINGDINGS - ABRACADABRA.

FIG. 12

## THE ECHO CHAMBER



BY REBECCA JAGOE

I am in ownership now of three feather dusters, a lambswool duster, two dusting cloths, a small hand-held vacuum cleaner, and with this arsenal I shall retreat.

It is too awful to live in a world of three dimensions, I tell you. Nothing changes in a drawing, and this is reassuring. Everything stays clean, crisp, perfect, and exactly as it was. Nothing need be done in order to keep order: in fact, disorder, seen in this case to be the smearing of a drawing across the page, must be acted out positively upon the drawing in order for change to take place. Otherwise, things remain exactly as they were since the day of their inception on the page. Shapes stay crisp, colours stay sharp, nothing is dirty. I want to be able to make something and know it will last this way into eternity. To reside in a place where a doorway is a crisp line and stays a crisp line and does not become a hazy smudge of rubbed out pencil, drawn over, page never as clean as it had been before, except in the world of objects it is dust that does the smudging.

Yes, dust. Everywhere it is inescapable. You might think that in this world of objects you can take something, something clean, and leave it, and then it will just stay that way but – NO, this is not the case at all, I must tell you that you are sadly deluded. You see, dust will have a way of falling upon objects gradually, always, continually, a perpetual near-invisible snow that descends from the sky, always falling ever downward from who knows what heathen cloud.

FIG. 12 (1) Endless rows of busts on plinths. Like an army of ancestors (2) 3 Human type heads and 3 lion type heads (3) Corrugated cardboard (4) To be worn at celebrations. Use shoulders to pass between participants (5) It was heavier than it looked but they heroically carried it anyway.

It falls, and you might wipe it away, you might pick up a feather duster to trap these minute particles in its oily fibres, but no sooner have you dislodged them than a number of new, equally rapacious dust motes will fall in their stead.

Look upwards, now, look up from this page. A shaft of light cuts through the room, a hazy geometric column illuminating their drifting trajectory. Tiny motes meander across your field of vision, falling out of sight once they are cast into shadow. Make no mistake though, they still exist, even once they shy from visibility. They are still there; they are still everywhere, tiny particles set to invade every orifice. When you breathe, you breathe dust. Dust settles on your eyelashes and on the auricles of your ears; it penetrates your clothing and bombards your skin in an endless campaign of contamination. Dust is change, and change will happen whether you like it or not. There is no escaping dust: it is an atmospheric virus.

You believe, I am sure, as I once believed, that permanence is the state of things unless change is enacted upon them. But I must tell you now that it is the other way round. Change is the state of things unless permanence is enacted, no FORCED upon them. Preservation does not keep things as they are, conservation is a falsity, it's all a dusty, smudgy lie, and I want to escape to a world of crisp lines where it can be a truth.

So you see, I have built a room within a room that I might escape their fall. This room is clad plywood and it is small because, you see, the smaller it is the easier it becomes to keep the dust out. So it is a small room of plywood, with one small entrance and no windows because – ha! Would I invite the dust in through such ridiculous portals? No I think not. So, I have constructed this room, with this small entrance that is only three feet tall by three feet wide

so one must propel oneself along the floor in order to enter. The room itself is small, six feet by six feet by six feet, which is enough to lie down in and stand up in and walk two steps in either direction or three diagonally, but its bijou dimensions make my campaign all the more manageable. At hourly intervals, you see, I will sweep the air systematically from corner to corner from top to bottom, with the hand-held vacuum cleaner (brand: Handivac) in order to clear the air of dust. I also dust the floor, alternating my weapon from duster to duster. And now I know, I know, that I shall never remove entirely its hideous invasion, but I can at least keep my room from changing as rapidly as the world of objects outside and as such I might slow the impact of time upon myself. Change may come, dust may fall, but in fighting back I slow the approach.

You think that dust signals the approach of death, no doubt. Dry, desiccating, the vitrification of matter over a prolonged period of time, things all moving towards death, everything turning to ashes. But no, it is not the case at all. Dust, tiny particles of skin, is living matter, grimy and slightly sticky when it lands. Coatings of dust sheath objects with a fatty, unintelligent slime mould that creeps slowly across the world, building up its grotty aggregate, slowly overtaking the clean, unloving objects with its horrific skein of life. The cold inanimate dignity of inanimate objects is overtaken by this rapacious, invasive, life force. Everything tends towards this mute and senseless life. And I can imprison it, trap it in papery vacuum bags, but I cannot kill the inevitable dust. It fills up the vacuum bag, and the swellings look like tumorous growths. I cannot kill it, but I can contain it, place it somewhere apart from me, in my near-dustless room. Here, I am not entirely safe from time, from change, from the smudge of greasy dust, but at least I am safer.



First published in 2017  
© 2017 Candida Powell-Williams

In conjunction with *The Vernacular History of  
the Golden Rhubarb*, Bosse and Baum Gallery  
January – March 2017.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication  
may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval  
system or transmitted, in any form by any  
means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying,  
recording or otherwise, without the prior  
permission of Candida Powell-Williams.

All images courtesy of Damian Griffiths,  
Oskar Proctor, Candida Powell-Williams  
and participants of the performance  
workshop held on 21st Jan 2017 at  
Bosse and Baum Gallery.

Design: Stinsensqueeze

Printed in the UK



**CANDIDA POWELL-WILLIAMS**