

Tom Morton  
on Eulalia Valldosera

The exhibition title 'Blood Ties' promises a meditation on familial bonds – on the way we are coloured by what has gone before, and will colour what is to come. Accordingly, in Eulalia Valldosera's new work *Family Ties* (2012), we are presented with a series of photographs featuring two family groups, linked by an extramarital love affair. In a pendant pair of images, we are told that the male lover continues to live with the mother of his two children, while the female lover is divorced. She has a daughter with her former husband, and remains unofficial stepmother to his son from his first marriage. Valldosera's subjects, then, are not quite nuclear families of the type beloved of Hollywood moviemakers or conservative politicians, but something altogether messier. They overspill any taxonomic box we might try to place them in.

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In the photographs, individuals from the two groups meet in a bright white space where they merge and mingle in various combinations, enacting what looks like a therapeutic psychodrama – the artist has spoken of the influence of Bert Hellinger's 'Family Constellations Method' on this work – in which they are joined by the long shadows of other family members who remain out of shot. Nowhere is there an image of purely genetic consanguinity. The notion of family, here, extends ever outwards, and we might almost imagine these people touching our own, distant lives. Like much of Valldosera's oeuvre, *Family Ties* seems to describe a path away from the bounded self. While hers is a practice much concerned with containers (not least the human body), it also points consistently to the possibility of escape. More often than not, this means submitting to the glare of a sublime, dissembling light.

In the installation *Love is sweeter than wine. Three stages of a relationship* (*Appearances No.3*) (1993-4), we encounter a trio of consecutive rooms. In each of these is what looks like a film set awaiting a camera crew and actors, or perhaps the aftermath of a domestic episode. From these mute dioramas,



we are to infer a narrative, and as the work's title suggests, this is likely to be a love story, although by no means a fairy tale. In *Room No.1: Play it again...*, two glasses rotate on a record player's turntable, locked in each other's woozy, intoxicating orbit, swilling with the last dregs from a collection of empty bottles of red wine. Strafed by the twin beams of a pair of slide-less slide projectors, the glasses' shadows climb the gallery walls, or fall into a nearby mirror that is propped up on one end of a vaguely Moroccan carpet – a stretch of fabric that perhaps alludes, along with the room's title, to the 1942 film *Casablanca*, in which love, or at least romance, is sacrificed on the altar of duty to the wider world. As the record player turns, the glasses' silhouettes melt together, creating an image of a single object crowned with a glowing penumbra of light. These vessels are our story's lovers, caught in the first flush of a new relationship, containing each other as a body contains liquid, or as a consciousness encloses, and is enclosed by, an idea. In *Room No.2: Neither with you nor without you*, the couple has grown apart. One glass, the male, is mired in the fibres of the no-longer-magic carpet, which has been transformed into a sombre blue abyss. Here he glowers, the wine souring in his belly, reflecting on a time when his dreams once took flight. The other glass, the female, remains on the turntable, her nearest companions a bottle of milk and household detergents, which we might read as symbols of motherhood and domestic labour – duties she must discharge with, it seems, little in the way of support. By the time we get to *Room No.3: It's when we are alone that we can be together*, the male has clambered atop a pile of books. Elevated by abstract knowledge, his shadow has become smaller and tighter than that of his companion, as though his turn towards the life of the mind has occasioned a physical diminishment, or else a concentration of his masculine essence. The female glass now shares the record player with a bottle of window cleaner, pointing to her ongoing oppression, although we should remember that this fluid is used to wipe away the things that fog our vision, and so might also be read as an unexpected tool of 'enlightenment'. Notably, the bottle of milk that debuted in *Room No.2* is also supported by several books, and this is where Valldosera's work strays into ever more ambiguous terrain. If we identify the bottle as a male baby, he becomes simply his father's son, set to replicate the processes that the piece enacts. If we identify it as a female baby, however, new possibilities take root.

Significantly, for all the changes that occur across the three rooms, both glasses are always filled with an identical measure of red wine. If this substance represents romance (with its wild bliss, and its terrible hangovers), Valldosera's installation appears to argue that it is something that will always course through us, male or female, quickening our blood or straining our tired, sequestered hearts. Love, however, is not romance, but is something altogether 'sweeter', and it seems that the glasses do not contain this vital, invisible draft. Perhaps

love exists, here, in the blurrings enacted by the projector's beams, in the way the artist uses light to double or triple lonely, single objects, to give them shadows that extend their paltry reach. Conventionally, we think of romance as something that evanesces, and love as something that endures, but Valldosera's installation seems to me to turn that idea on its head. Romance (a word that also means 'fiction', or 'story') operates, in this work's schema, as a perpetual illusion that we use to give shape to ourselves, and to others. Love arrives in the fleeting moments when we allow this illusion to slip. We might think here of the words of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila (an important figure for Valldosera): 'Accustom yourself to making many acts of love, for they enkindle and melt the soul'.

Wine also appears in Valldosera's *The Period* (2006), the title of which points not only towards menstruation, but also towards broader questions of time. Here, twenty-eight glasses are arranged on a barroom table, each of them filled with different quantities of red liquid, as though awaiting the attentions of a party of thirsty oenophiles. On the floor nearby runs an arcing dolly rail, a piece of equipment to which a filmmaker might attach a wheeled camera to achieve a smooth tracking shot. In the place of any such recording equipment is a canopied pram, which has been fitted with a film projector, although not the usual accompanying media player. Visitors encountering the work in the gallery space are invited to push this device along the tracks, illuminating the rank of wine glasses, and casting ruby red light and shadows onto a large screen at the table's far end. Like many of Valldosera's installations, *The Period* appears to be very direct in its address: the wine, here, surely stands in for menstrual blood, just as the white light that beams from the carriage fixed to the crescent-shaped dolly rail surely stands for the culturally inferred (although scientifically unverified) influence of the moon on a woman's monthly cycle, or else its irruption by pregnancy. Given this, we might think of the piece as being about the slide between biological and social determinism, or the way we seek out links between the workings of the human body and the wider universe, but this is complicated by both the work's use of filmmaking apparatuses, and its participatory dimension. Valldosera's invitation to trundle the pram along its tracks extends to anybody who cares to do so – a teenage girl on the brink of puberty, or an expectant mother, or a childless woman going through the menopause. A son or his father or his grandfather might equally take his turn. If all works of art throw us back on our own experience, while reminding us, through the very fact of their existence, that this is not all that the world contains, then this is something that *The Period* dramatizes to fascinating effect. Although the arc described by the baby carriage is fixed and unwavering, each person who pushes it along the rails will do so in their own particular manner, informed by their comfort or discomfort at summoning up the spectre of a vital

physiological function that our culture still seeks to repress. Valldosera's use of the mechanics of cinematographic capture and transmission embroil us in a process of making visible. *The Period* transforms a technology of concealment into a technology of disclosure, in which the usual temporal protocols of film (impatient jump cuts, ellipses, flashes forwards and back) are overwritten by the very different time code of human biology.

20 In her video *Interviewing Objects No.1: Reloaded* (1997-2008), Valldosera questions an artist, a curator and a collector about their material possessions. Shot so that their faces never appear on camera, they are shown in their domestic dwellings, all of which conform firmly to stereotype – the artist's place is scruffy, the curator's apartment aims at a budget version of minimalist chic, and the collector's house, for all its carefully choreographed 'tastefulness', has the vague tang of vulgarity common to the homes of the rich. Given that Valldosera's interlocutors make, contextualize, and purchase art, we might imagine that they are particularly open to the notion that objects have a meaning beyond their utility, and so it proves. In a series of short, intercut scenes, they tell us the human stories behind a number of unremarkable items – watches, tables, sofas, glassware, even the wire seal of a champagne cork that has been fashioned into a miniature chair by a bored party guest. Showing us a gift from his girlfriend, the artist worries that to become overinvested in the souvenirs of a relationship is to become 'addicted to the material situation', while the curator relates how the balance of 'power' in her marriage on any given day might be read through the position of her furniture, and the collector reveals that, following her divorce, she 'is not sentimentally attached to things anymore'. Towards the end of the video, this woman speaks about her role as the owner of an upscale house clearance company, in which she is often approached by bereaved families who cannot agree on how to divide up a departed loved one's possessions, and would prefer that they were sold off at auction rather than continue to provoke tension and distress. If this is an instance of what she calls 'people hurting because of things', then this is something that the collector has experienced herself. At one point, she produces a present from her ex-husband (with whom, it seems, she is now uneasily reunited), a sea urchin's shell pierced with a penny-sized hole. This was her wedding ring, which she wore at a ceremony on a Kenyan beach: 'it hurt the finger a little bit, but then marriage does hurt, always'. Valldosera's video points, in the end, to a very human fallacy: the transformation of objects into subjects, and subjects into objects, with all the power reversals and alienation that that implies. The work's title, we should remember, is *Interviewing Objects*. It is not the interviewees' possessions that speak, here, but the interviewees themselves.

John Keats' *Ode to A Grecian Urn* (1819) sees the poet contemplate a decorative ceramic from the classical world, which has survived into the Industrial Age. In one of the most famous stanzas in English poetry, Keats addresses this object with the words:

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayst,  
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know

Valldosera's sculptural work *We Are One Body* (2012) employs two large, rough-textured vessels once used to ferment wine, which we might take as distant descendants of Keats' urn. Onto the surface of one of these, the artist has projected Youtube footage of the recent anti-cuts riots in Greece, a process that appears to cast the 21<sup>st</sup> century protestors in the roles of the Gods and Heroes that grace 'Red Figure' and 'Black Figure' classical pottery. Far from mythologizing these contemporary Athenian youths, however, Valldosera is rather concerned with pressing home the urgency of their economic plight – there is no Keatsian 'beauty' in this footage, and the only 'truth' it imparts is the fact that in times of crisis, as in all other times, the powerful will protect their interests at the expense of the powerless. The surface of the other vessel remains untroubled by imagery. Instead, it projects an animation from its belly onto the gallery ceiling, in which a circle becomes a cube. Suggestive of sacred mathematics, this shifting form bears resemblance, in its more complex iterations, to the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, or to Metatron's Cube – geometric figures that allude to the interconnectedness of all things. The second urn also emits an audio recording of an oration by the American past life regression hypnotist and healer Dolores Cannon, in which she states that:

... We are one world. We are one body. And we are connected to the source, to God, because we all are walking along the same path. We just see it in different ways. My truth might not be your truth. You find your own truth, and when you do it is your own truth. Maybe others don't understand it, will not believe it, but it is your truth. Don't give your power to anyone... Everyone is one. We are all connected together. And we're heading to a beautiful world. We are coming out of the darkness into the light...

(Dolores Cannon says "we are part of Everything"  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of5qDpEeN7o>)



What is suggested by this juxtaposition of concrete political unrest with abstract metaphysical speculation? Perhaps it is that these two vessels – one touched by rage, the other filled with hope – both represent efforts to bring about a better future, in which divisions between people disappear, and a collective mode of being emerges. If so, then we should note that both the young Greek protestors and New Age gurus such as Cannon remain marginalized voices, often dismissed by the mainstream as violent opportunists, or pseudo-religious cranks that prey on the credulous and the lost. In linking them to ancient democratic and mystical traditions, Valldosera reminds us that there is nothing new about dreaming of a new world – if ‘we are one body’ in space, then ‘we are one body’ across history’s broad span. Wine, of course, takes time to ferment, and to mellow. Left too long, it turns to vinegar, and eventually evaporates.

22 Containment of a somewhat different sort takes place in Valldosera’s *Interactive Bottles (Forever Living Products No.3)* (2008), in which a series of commercial detergent bottles are presented on plinths in the gallery space. Although they appear, at first glance, to be nothing more than products plucked from a supermarket shelf, if we pick them up and hold them to our ears, we soon discover that their original contents have been decanted, and have been replaced by audio recordings of anonymous human beings recounting what the artist has described as ‘real testimonies, laments, assertions, comments on situations we would like to forget’. Some of these bottles also allow us to record our own traumas, overwriting those already stored in their hard-drives. When we take these objects in our hands, an automatic ‘answer phone message’ is activated:

Welcome to my space. I am equipped to erase, to eliminate everything you want to forget. If you tell me about it, I will keep it inside me and in a few days it will have disappeared from my space for ever, and from yours too [...] You should know that while you are recording your voice I shall be erasing part of my content. When you finish, you can listen to the most recent recordings, including your own [...] what do you want to erase from your life?

This is a work, then, that promises salvation. But if in the Catholic tradition this is something achieved through the reception of God’s grace, here it is achieved through the expulsion of negative memories. Spiritual renewal comes not through sipping communion wine, but through spitting out the poison of experience. Significantly, in *Interactive Bottles* this is a collective project. According to the work’s logic, to tell of your own troubles is to make another person’s troubles disappear, to unburden yourself is to unburden your neighbour. But if Valldosera’s subtitle, *Forever Living Products*, hints at eternity, it is not necessarily eternity of a heavenly sort. Perhaps the reason that these interactive

bottles will ‘live forever’ is because there is an infinite supply of human woe, and that they will always be filled by whispered tales of tragedy. No act of cleaning, of course, is ever absolute. The dirt always returns.

The final new work in *Blood Ties, Mother and Father* (2012) fills a room with a collection of personal objects, among them an engagement ring, a row of seedlings, looking glasses, weighing scales, underwear and a pair of tights. On one wall is a mirrored medicine cabinet, onto which a projector beams the silhouetted images of a man and a woman, who appear caught up in a series of ritualized demonstrations of love and hate, from fervent kisses to vicious slaps across the face. Now and then, they are joined by other silhouettes (perhaps their parents, or their children), who enfold them in a suffocating embrace, rendering the whole group as amorphous as a Rorschach blot. Seesawing between affection and violence, consolation and control, *Mother and Father* is not a Utopian vision. If the figures were to see themselves as we do, they might understand that they are all part of the same shadow play. Instead they tear at each other in desire and disgust, insisting always on their own insubstantial borders, unaware that they exist in a theatre of light.

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Valldosera’s exhibition title is, in the end, a paradox. ‘Blood’ is a liquid, and cannot ‘Tie’ one thing to another. Like all liquids, it adopts the shape of any container it is put in, but seeks always to seep outwards. Away from its dark vessels, it might suffuse the fabric of the world without discrimination. There, it might surrender its form.