

## Courtney Coombs

### *Sometimes it's the little things*

6th - 21st September, 2019

... because as always  
I fix on the land. I am stuck to earth.

– Adrienne Rich, *'Atlas for a Difficult World'*

In her long poem *'Atlas for a Difficult World'*, Adrienne Rich trains her attention on American monuments, American violence, wars and industry, places where the metal “voice of the freeway” drowns out human speech. She attends to the dominant symbols of American history and cultural identity, but tracks away, repeatedly, to the ‘unmonumented’. Nature in particular – wild treefrogs, fog, pilgrim ants, the huge sun, the quarter moon – pulls on the poem. Nature functions as *'Atlas'* not so much as counterbalance but as response in the dialectical sense, and as a generative site of its own cultural possibility. In other words, nature makes its way into the chamber of the poem, is afforded a place in the symbolic.

The work in *'Sometimes it's the little things'* – a video on a tiny screen embedded in a single wall and a shallow stack of printed sheets on the floor – is drawn from a recent trip Courtney Coombs made with their partner across America. Their travels took them to some of the major events of 20th Century American art, starting in New York and then travelling west to Land Art sites – Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* 1969; Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* 1970 and *Amarillo Ramp* 1974; and Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* 1976 – and to Marfa, Texas, where Donald Judd's home and studios are preserved as a museum.

It was in Marfa, while on a Judd Foundation tour, that Coombs shot a few seconds of footage of a tree top in motion. Leaves shimmy brightly against the clear cerulean of a Texan sky before gradually slowing, the wind quickening then dying. The relationship between the wind and the leaves is important here, as what enlivens the scene, but Coombs is most interested in what they can mean to us, how nature can enter the scene of representation. Looped and offset in a bare white wall this little video – little in size, little in length – fixes our gaze on something peripheral. Outside the frame the central and canonical story of Judd's imposing, machined forms is being told; nearby his vast architectural and natural spaces reconfigured by blocks and boxes. As Rich does in *'Atlas'*, Coombs puts herself in the way of dominant cultural forces – art, places, narratives – but then turns, lifts their head, lets their attention (and with it our attention) rest on something nearby, otherwise neglected.

A similar attentiveness to the marginal and natural (or the natural as marginal) is evinced in the stack of small printed sheets on the floor. Each page carries a photo Coombs took while in L.A, this time looking down instead of up. Grid like segments of cement pavement meet the bitumen of the road, a bit of leaf litter. A crack in the pavement exposes the earth beneath, and a single plant with two pink flowers has taken root here. Recalling Félix González-Torres' paper stack works, visitors to the exhibition are free to take a sheet home with them. At times González-Torres also printed his sheets with images of the natural world: a bird in flight, clouds, water. Learning from González-Torres, repeating his forms and strategies, Coombs invests their work in a queer symbolic genealogy.