

Four Painting Shows

SADIE COLES HQ, JOSH LILLEY, KATE MACGARRY & WILKINSON, LONDON, UK

This is a relatively opportune moment to be a figurative painter, particularly one versed in hypnagogic scenarios and feisty colour. Revivals for abstraction-bucking artists such as Alice Neel, Sylvia Sleigh, Ed Paschke, Jim Nutt and other Chicago imagists in general have been afoot awhile, in part surely because those painters' impoliteness and, at times, outright peculiarity now look exotic. Simultaneously, there's a backlash around the recent post-Christopher-Wool-school of so-called 'zombie formalism' and, since the art world adores a binary inversion, increased visibility for younger painters who bundle imagery with a screen-bright, prismatic palette. In several recent London summer shows these headwinds met, suggesting strenuous efforts to tie idiosyncratic and almost exclusively representational painting practices of today to those of yesteryear.

At Josh Lilley, five paintings made by Victor Willing between 1978 and 1987 were paired with five new ones by Nicholas Hatfull, not that equality necessarily ensued. Willing, in his spotlighted last years, would sit and stare into space until something rose in his mind, often something with an ironical, tragicomic relation to modernism: the animist geometry of a red pyramid observing itself in the mirror (*Aha, So There You Are*, 1980), for example. The tremulous little portrait triptych *Red Head* (1986) visits cubist distortions on someone who doesn't seem too happy about it; in his later years, Willing endured multiple sclerosis, couldn't stand (hence the sitting) and, by 1986, could only paint small. Maybe these facts deserved mention, but the gallery's textual materials were busy connecting the artist to Hatfull – born in 1984, four years before Willing died – via qualities one might naively think had expired: the 'visionary', and 'metaphysical presence'.

Hatfull paints, ostentatiously so, like he's hallucinating in Pret A Manger, perhaps on self-titrated painkillers after a fall, maybe with Giorgio de Chirico and Philip Guston catalogues to hand. *Waterfront docks – skewering at the infinite table* (2015) convenes

an orthopaedic boot, a takeaway egg-and-cess sandwich and a coffee cup, all on an outside scale, against a sketchy, whooshing landscape in yellow against sky blue. Buzzed by a seagull, guest-starring a manhole (with inviting downward ladder), the painting seemingly advertises looking out at the paving stones and seeing the beach, or inner space. Sandwich-shop detritus, heavy footwear and shores speckle other paintings too, but, particularly next to Willing's undimmed paintings, the machinery audibly creaks, the dialogical symbolism affected. One sees not a vision but an assiduous mimicry of a visionary state, which perhaps just makes Hatfull's paintings intensely contemporary.

In 'Painting 1, 2, 3', a three-artist show at Kate MacGarry, the adjectives tossed around were 'heroically-scaled', 'bold', 'loose', 'exuberant', 'expressive'. (I return to press-release language, with apologies, to note how simplistically buzzy the framing discourse has become.) No longer treated with circumspection, such terms are now sheer amnesiac hype, yet they fit. Katherine Bernhardt's increasingly ascendant work views representation through the formalizing scrim of the digital: flat fields of objects-as-emoji (in the case of *Hawaiian Punch*, 2014, pineapples, cigarettes, watermelon, avocados) appear in electrified fluorescents, contours humming. Ponder how mediated experience is now authentic if you like; mostly it seems that Bernhardt's painting wants to be nocturnal, sexy and right now. From here a viewer might lurch to Rose Wylie's looming six-panel *Elizabeth and Henry with Birds* (2014), apparently based on a Robert Peake the Elder painting from the early 17th century, which enthrones two of James I's unluckier children in Wylie's ragged, illustrative, ambiguous aesthetic. That Henry would die from typhoid at 18 and Elizabeth end up exiled is here replayed, or gestured towards, as a blurry tragedy: giant brown birds whirl around a stony keep that rises above the



1
 Daniel Heidkamp
Shatterproof the Proscenium,
 oil on linen, 81 × 76 cm

2
 Victor Willing, *Red Head*, 1986,
 oil on canvas, each: 50 × 50 cm

3
 Katherine Bernhardt
Hawaiian Punch, 2014, acrylic
 and spray paint on canvas,
 2.4 × 3 m

4
 Barbara Rossi, *Parlor Picture*, 1983,
 acrylic and ink
 on paper in artist's frame
 65 × 80 × 4 cm



unknowing kids. Rebecca Morris's *Untitled* (#19–06) (2006), a mandala-like dots-and-dashes abstraction that resembles a psychedelic ashtray, capped off a show countersigned by a hazy agenda. Maybe a curatorial point was being made about women painters, scale and blithe vivacity; if so, the gallery didn't feel the need to point it out, which perhaps constitutes a gender-political statement in itself.

At Sadie Coles HQ, June: A Painting Show' also downgraded expectations via blank titling, but its rainbow-hued 14-artist sequence was an aerated pleasure. It opened with Chicago imagism mainstay Barbara Rossi, whose meticulous, near-diagrammatic canvases unhinge the domestic: in *Parlour Picture* (1983) an O-mouthed humanoid contorts, on a rug, in a stretchy yoga move beneath two imposing, mechanical-looking easy chairs, sharp rendering sparking against narrative obliquity. The show rewound repeatedly elsewhere – to Sylvia Sleigh's key work *Felicity Rainnie Reclining* (1972), for example, in whose feminist *Olympia* the eponymous American artist, blonde, tan-lined and nude, reposes against an aquarium-toned tumult of William Morris patterns; and to Yamashita Kikuji's liquiform surrealism – reflecting the artist's own harrowing wartime experience – in which phlegmatic Imperial Army generals appear within domestic sittings, the floating worlds of *ukiyo-e* repurposed as an unshakable bad dream.

Interpenetrating, layered and molten realities, indeed, served as cross-generational currency throughout. In *Untitled* (2009) Jana Euler encircles a clunky central image of a focused violinist with a cartoonish network of miniaturized sites for cognitive labour: bed (with laptop), train table, painting studio, bar, etc. Helen Johnson's *Postcolonialist Feminist Drama* (2013) backdrops an equivocal image of a couple dancing, one blindfolded, with a cursory, conquest-themed dream landscape in which aspects of an 18th-century naval scene muddle, again, with porn. Meanwhile, though it's apparently not the artist's intention, the terrific, chalky, isometric paintings of the 75-year-old recent art-world 'discovery' Mernet Larsen – populated by boxy people seemingly becoming digitized, rationalized – might tempt you to connect a desire for spatial depth with screen-based life's inexorable flatness. June, however, didn't rest there, bounding off to the Philippines and Rodel Tapaya's immense, neo-psychedelic stews of folk imagery and brusque shifts of scale; to Iraq and Hayy Kahraman's stilled admiring, on cool brown linen, of Persian miniature art, Arabic script and a hieratic female portraiture in whose background simmer the masculinist attitudes of Islamic extremism.

In essaying so many context-specific approaches, the show – even if inadvertently – smelted figuration into a nebulous normative category, a microcosm of hyper-pluralism. This was an attitude reprised in 'Figuratively', the Matthew Higgs-curated, five-artist show at Wilkinson. Again, it would seem that, at this moment, to paint figuratively with vigour is credential enough. As such, idiosyncratic painting – each artist a linseed-oil-scented island – might be an artefact of the recent vogue for 'inner worlds', which in turn connects recent figurative art to 'outsider art', a sphere that Higgs has long explored, and the rolling trend of supposedly 'insider' artists mirroring the febrile, anxious moves of their country cousins. Here, you could lean into the Chicago- and Yale-educated painter Daniel Rios Rodriguez's folksy, pebble-bordered little canvas *Rocks Off, Rocks On* (2015) – celebrating a pair of apples in the brown and white tones of sauce-splashed Christmas puddings – and see the sharp ends of nail scissors spiking through the canvas, about



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Elsewhere, Daniel Heidkamp's vivid, child's-eye, *plein air* views of blossom trees and Frank Gehry architecture, Jane Corrigan's violent, scrubby narratives (across three small paintings, we glimpse the fate of a hunted rabbit), and Ella Kruglyanskaya's sassy graphic melanges of modernist figuration styles linked up only on an axis of theatrical intensity. In a second show downstairs, alongside his own appropriations of books and excised pages, Higgs presented Clive Hodgson's mordant mixes of process-based conceptualism and wristy minimal abstraction, in which the artist's name and the date of making are compositional rudiments.

My eyes rested on *Untitled* (2015), a lanky grey rectangle and a squarish white block idling against dilute grape, under which Hodgson had assertively emblazoned 'C. Hodgson' and '2015'. Some gaming with connotation and deliberation was underway, but I was starting to see Laurel & Hardy and, in my peripheral vision, Higgs was breaking up the left-to-right hang with stray works by artists from 'Figuratively'. That, everyone seemed to be insisting, is quite enough abstraction, at least for now.

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