

Exit Review '06 – Liverpool John Moores University Degree Shows

Joanna Spitzner

Ken Ashton

Ashton's work is inspired by the photographic close-up, of new ways of seeing that are possible through technology, whether through magnification, slow motion, or framing. Walter Benjamin called this the "optical unconscious," a sort of discovery of details previously not conscious to the eye. The forms in Ashton's work, both photographic and sculptural, are sensual. The most sexualized has the viewer looking literally through a slit to see a v-form composed of pubic-like toothpicks. Another piece is comprised of many sperm forms gathered together, as if frozen in its journey. Photographs of constructed forms evoke scientific imagery, nature photography, electron microscopes, and minimalism. The composition of tactile fields in much of this work, of shifting focus and repetition, both seduces and undermines vision. These strategies come together in a piece that combines both photography and sculpture: a photograph of a mouth, cropped and surrounded by whiskers, is repeated like scales on a foam support. The mouths becomes sores or eyes through repetition and the turning, cropping, coloring and folding in on itself. It is this sort of scientific otherness, of very visceral viewing that makes this work compelling.

Michael Costigan

There are two different yet related bodies of work here, connected by a play with the borders of visual recognition. The first group of works, rambling drawings on canvas, seem to be built on pure intuition and approach psychedelia ("is that a dragon I see there?"). The second series, based around one of the Rorschach ink blots, presents a more in-depth look at visual systems, shape and perception. Through five paintings, different visual reproductive methods are referenced: blots, paint, drawing, printing, pixilation, and afterimage. In each, a different arrangement and handling of image occurs, in mostly black and gray on a yellow field, with small elements to direct viewing. A sixth painting combines both kinds of work, but in doing so the drawing becomes just patterned background and the blot shape becomes too figural. The attempt to bring together the technologies of image making with the drift of automatic drawing has potential. The strength of the Rorschach work is the way in which its image hovers between representation and formlessness, of its movement around an image. Costigan's statement posits the artist as outsider, a sort of mythic person who sees differently. Bataille and his circle seem like a better avenue for grounding this work.

Grace Flanagan

Although I was at first suspicious of the child-like drawing style of this artists work, as I looked more carefully I found myself enjoying the unstudied manner in which each drawing presents a wonderful imagination. In "Penguins," one penguin stands to face 29 others, in a flattened naïve space. Another series are botanicals: flowers waving to the viewer; ferns and roots, insects larger than life. The artists' collage work is equally compelling. One is comprised of primary colored tape, layered and angled and applied on an irregularly cut sheet of paper. In another, images from newspapers are altered, some simply defacing famous people, others becoming surrealist scenes worthy of Max

Ernst. This surreal natural history is also apparent in an untitled watercolor in which one shark is about to eat a fish, which is in turn eating a fish, all in the site of a sunken pirate ship. The big fish theory is carried out with using triangular compositions that energize the page. There is a sense of discovery in this work, of strong composition, other ways of thinking, and a lightness often not seen in the art world.

Gemma Harris

Harris' main work is an installation of different open envelopes covering the walls and ceilings, the floor covered in letters and paper, as if spit out from mouths. The space directs you downward, and the letters ranges from specific address ("Yes, I received your Christmas card,") to the more generic ("I'm 5'7' brown hair, brown eyes...") to blank pages. What is actually written seems less important than the act of writing and the materials of delivery. In looking through other material by the artist, one learns that this installation is based on a series of works in various places, in particular St. John's Shopping Centre, where people were asked to write to someone they see at that moment. Other explorations show observations of the way people move through spaces and pinhole photography of ghostly space, and the idea of the passerby, the encounter, the individual connection within a sea of anonymity emerges as a central concern. Harris still seems to be working out the relation of action to static form, of the social in relation to its representation. In earlier incarnations, the envelopes, and sometimes bottles, were arranged in an x-formation, symbolizing that passing moment, but this resulted in the formation itself dominating over any relationship to how people interact. Abandoning this x form seems like the right step towards negotiating social movement and its presentation in material form. Harris writes of "non-places, like supermarkets," a term I don't quite understand and would like to see elaborated, but overall this artist shows the foundations for a diverse future practice.

Michael Hesketh

I feel as if the American abstract expressionist and teacher Hans Hofmann has been reincarnated, after spending some time with other dead painters. Hesketh displays many paintings of various sizes, exploring the push and pull of color, varying applications of paint, fields and mark making. Like Hofmann, Hesketh refers to landscape in his statement, but this is a reference that does not give entry into the work. I am fairly sure this work is not ironic, yet it does ask questions about a historical movement in painting and its relevance today, as a contemporary practice. What does the gesture with brush and palette knife, the placement, combination, layering of color offer? And what are its limits as a practice? My only answer to this is that the inner subjectivity on which the act is based, Hesketh's "inscape," transformed through perceptual apprehension becomes surface, superficial. The subject remains mute and uncommunicative, an eye with taste. Hesketh shows a skill and passion with paint, but this is not enough. Hofmann absorbed different strategies of artmaking in his time, and inspired artists to find their own vocabularies. If he truly were reincarnated he wouldn't exist as a dead painter but one who lives in the moment.

Elizabeth Hodgkinson

Hodgkinson is interested in “creative destruction,” specifically the use of fire as a process. Four paintings show her explorations with materials, mainly canvas and plastic bin bags; they are joined by five sculptural pieces: cartoon-like flames, like Mickey Mouse hands, made of wire and mesh sit on the floor in a row. Three of the paintings are made layered canvas featuring cauterized cuts, flayed open, like surgery or dissection. The largest painting, “Cyaneus Plura,” has a melted web of black plastic delicately covering a purple-stained canvas. There is something in the controlled chance of the flame, its irregular edges, holes, and wearing of materials evokes melancholy and sensuality. But the use of painting as a structure and reference limits this work, there is less a sense of destruction than of framing a novel way to create.

Arthur Lloyd

The artist hasn't let go of his past career as a plasterer; neither has he been able to transform it. The work for the most part remains too literal, repeatedly presenting the plasterer's hands, one holding a trowel, the other a mortar board, plaster in frozen motion in between. This act of plastering, concretized, is more successful in Lloyd's installation, where again we see the hands, on an altar-like table, in a room with gray/concrete and beige plaster covering the walls. The use of color evokes a sense of painting, of gesture and calls attention to the act of creating the surface. In another room, two more hand formations are presented; along with another work entitled “Belly Dancing.” This is unusual in showing a life-sized male torso, with large belly, and its repetition does manage to create a sense of movement. Lloyd's primary interest seems to be in materials, the bellies created in porcelain, copper, and clay, but any reason for using material is absent. It is as if the artist is trying to find meaning through repetition, almost like an obsessive-compulsive.

Sam Savage

These paintings offer us frosted domestic horror. The pastel palette and thick application of paint turn the subject matter—domestic interiors, some harmless, others frighteningly historical--into quiet, sugar coated disturbances. It is the combination of different private and public histories and the handling of paint in portraying them that makes this work meaningful. The titles of the work are important in understanding this context, without them one would not know that this is of Fed West's basement, Ho Chi Minh's house, or Granny's house. Their soft monochromatic colors enforce a sense of the banality of evil, it's ordinariness. Hannah Arendt used this term to describe how such evil cannot be thought. As a group, it is the act of painting itself (rather than thought) that is primary to its subject matter; we are given two different versions of Uncle Ho's house, and three different versions of 25 Cromwell Street, including one scribbly drawing. In comparing different versions, one can see the hit or miss of painting, where dead areas appear or shapes click into relationships. It is a study of painting: the flattening of space in wormy contours describing form and of different distributions of value. Those paintings of less loaded subjects are more successful: “Beauty Shrine,” a scene of a vanity mirror in thick small flower like daubs of paint evokes a wedding cake. It is this bringing together of subject and process that shows the most potential.

Carla Stafford

In this installation, two hanging clusters of “pods,” dramatically lit, wait in front of a painting depicting a body of organs, like a queen in the hive. This embryo/chrysalis/cocoon form is familiar, a trope for the body, birth, transformation. There is nothing creepy or uncanny in this work. The pods are made by wrapping canvas around wood and plastic strips, some further wrapped in a variety of yarn. The yarn, often fuzzy, gives a sort of stuffed animal quality to the cocoons (perhaps a teddy bear will emerge from them). Stafford is interested in the interior and exterior, beauty, mind and spirit, and the body seems like an appropriate vessel for exploring this. The materials used in its arrangement in space limit this work to just repetition of shape, there is no sense of time, change, flesh, or otherness. Canvas and yarn seem to be binding rather than allowing the butterflies out.

Julie Sudbury

It is difficult to address a personal monument made public—what is the stranger, the viewer, to experience in a private dialogue? Both works Sudbury displays are memorials to her stepfather, who has recently died. Like listening in, we are seeing a conversation between two people, the living and the dead. The use of hands in this work seems appropriate, as if needing another language, or existing in the realm of the deaf and the mute. “Many Hands Make Light Work,” the more conventional monument, consists of three sculpted hands, larger than life but not an overwhelming scale. One hand is palm down, one reaching upwards, and one held out open; metonyms of the stepfather. They are in time, in motion, assuring. “We Will Be Careful,” is a sort of billboard message to him signaling (in sign language) that the daughter is all right. There is an impulse towards unnecessary tricks in this work. Sudbury asks that we wear 3D glasses to view the sign language hands, which are painted in red and green; but the optical experience is minimal and unrelated to anything else in the work. The sculpted hands have a blue patina and stone-like texture, laid on AstroTurf. A true garden seems a more appropriate setting, if students were allowed to exhibit outside the confines of the building. There is much to learn from death; and it is one of the most difficult yet crucial experiences to communicate. This work remains much too private for any kind of shared experience, although the potential for it is there.