

+billion_ #66: Liquid Fire's Promise

SHANE McCARTHY

'Words, sometimes, get in the way of meaning'

mother's tankstation, Dublin

25 September - 2 November, 2013.



SHANE McCARTHY
stilted sincerity (2013)
Digital drawing and wall colour (Edition of 3)
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation

In an artworld context, Bruce Nauman is synonymous with the neon sign. So much so that the American artist put off generations of artists from using neon signage, especially art students, who, most of the time, naively compete to be novel. But experience teaches the artist (if they take the time to look over their shoulder) that they can only ever aspire to be a warped mirror image of what has gone before. Today, we see neon signs utilised within an 'art about art' frame; as either a nostalgic turn of the hyper-modern page or activating prop to sit the contemporary context on; or, as the cheap promise of fulfilling desire (desire = 'lack' in a Lacanian sense).

The 'promise' has always been neon's communicative allure. But neon's promise did not begin with Nauman's neon sign *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967), or end with Tracey Emin's neon Hallmark moment *I Promise to Love You* (2010). Perhaps Nauman can be credited with shattering the illusion of neon's promise, but the promise beckoned behind phosphor-coated, glass tubing long before the late 1960s. The neon sign was emblematic of the American dream since the '20s. Dubbed 'Liquid Fire', neon signs decorated small American businesses – and still do in shops that, ironically, cannot afford a revamp with LED lighting – with the promise of the best coffee, best food, best sex show. New York's Times Square and Las



SHANE McCARTHY
absent presence (2013)
Monitors, tables, drawer, digital drawings
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation

Vegas' casinos are the epicentres of empty promises of wealth and the imagined trappings that come with Big Money. The 24/7 neon glow symbolised cheap success minus the labour. The lottery ticket, casino roulette, well-equipped sex shop, are all fast-track methods to fulfill what a person believes is the lack in their life.

Irish artist Shane McCarthy has taken it upon himself to simulate the neon sign, by first digitally drawing it, and then projecting what is an exquisitely executed simulacrum onto the gallery wall at mother's tankstation, Dublin. It's a wonderful visual conceit, and a weighty one at that, considering the neon elephant in the room. The question is, why has McCarthy gone to such lengths to simulate what is a wonderfully crafted object in the first place, that illuminates like no other element in daylight? This question is best answered by McCarthy's digital drawings displayed in the gallery, which are as visually attractive as they are conceptually layered.

In the dark entrance hall of mother's tankstation – a relative cubby hole space usually containing a curtain-raiser artwork just before you enter the gallery proper – electric cables from a yellow, step-down transformer collect in a corner. The transformer is functionally unnecessary, voltage-wise, but a theatrically apt framing device for McCarthy's projected digital drawing that spells out – with a golden neon glow – *stilted sincerity*. What adds to the illusion that neon light is penetrating the penumbra of the windowless space, is the saffron coloured wall on which *stilted sincerity* is projected. Somehow, the digital drawing looks bigger than in reality. Perhaps it's the adjective "stilted," swaying to and fro between definitions – suggesting unsteady architecture in one instance, to self-conscious communication in another. Read semantically, *stilted sincerity* describes its own obfuscation; living up to the title of the exhibition: 'Words, sometimes, get in the way of meaning'. Words, however, have been the whipping boy for miscommunication since the first time someone said 'I didn't mean it that way' during the formation of an argument. In the gallery, McCarthy's display of artworks



SHANE McCARTHY
alluring token (2013)
Mixed media installation
Dimension variable
Courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation

are not exactly arguing with each other, like, let's say a 'Bruce Nauman' or 'Ed Ruscha'. Rather, it's as if the argument has already occurred; flickering sparks of activity suggesting damage after the electrical storm, or, with a glass half full, potential beginnings.

Two tube televisions sit face-to-face on two compact tables. The digitally drawn words, *absent presence*, illuminate both. However, the near obsolete technology on which the identical digital drawings are presented have no visible evidence of a DVD player or USB socket: semantic ghosts arguing in a shell of obsolescence?

With daylight filtering through the pitched skylight of mother's tankstation, directly above McCarthy's timber assemblage with a rolled up blue carpet acting as a projection screen, the message of the digitally drawn, rolling text is lost in the bright daylight of the gallery. Whispering ever so gently of a possible new direction for the artist, *untitled* comes across as an artwork in transition and perhaps unsure of itself; literally so considering the long pauses between faded, intermittent text. Perhaps 'suggestion' is the intention here? As the days get a little dimmer in late Autumn it may come into its own, in the same way Michael Snow's *So It Is* did, screened at mother's tankstation during the cold blue afternoon light of November/December 2009.¹ But placed alongside the aesthetic and conceptual clarity of McCarthy's digital, neon drawings, *untitled* is a little flat no matter what the season or time of day.

Where there is no doubt is McCarthy's primary display in the gallery entitled *alluring token*. The first digital drawing that I experienced by McCarthy was at his degree show in 2011: the words *beautiful expectation* projected onto studio wall at the Institute of Art, Design & Technology (IADT). *alluring token* is beauty's arrival. Amid an array of electric light sources that coyly peek from underneath timber and behind cerulean blue insulation, a metal work bench with a timber construct houses the projector from which the digital drawing is thrown. Although McCarthy's phraseology usually verges on oxymoronic cancellation, *alluring token* is, what

it is, a self-reflective, patiently constructed charm, shimmering close to the gallery floor. Through simulation, McCarthy momentarily succeeds in swiping conceptual ownership of the neon sign away from Bruce Nauman with an illusory sleight of hand.

Once, the neon sign framed the door of consumerism, but now contradicts the contemporary model of capitalism by being handmade and too labour intensive to produce. Neon signs are being switched off one-by-one in the new millennia, substituted for the much more efficient LED. McCarty's simulation could not have come at a better time, a time when the virtual is turning the tide on material existence. Nauman was not just attracted to the neon sign because it was sexy, feminine and violent, but because of its potential to spell out the contradictions inherent in language and contemporary morals as a readymade. However, like everything else in our unreality, there will come a time when the glamour of the object will be unceremoniously digitized. For the time being, the saving grace from a future when delayed gratification is a loading error, is the fact that digital simulation still exhibits a sense of labour intensive creativity that is visually tactile, exemplified by McCarthy's digital drawings. We haven't yet arrived when digital simulation will be instantaneous – a time in the future when labour is measured in computer code.

McCarthy's technological tinkering as a creative process echoes the early days of John Gerrard's career. The fellow Irish artist fumbled with inadequate technologies in efforts to build ambitious, digitally animated simulacrum of sweeping, temporal realities long before it was sensible to so do. Today, technology has caught up to Gerrard's conceptual desire to reproduce reality *via* digital data, so much so that the artist's concept and digital aesthetic are in harmony – relative, of course, to our short-sighted imagination to perceive what technological advancements await us in the future. The aesthetic complexity of McCarthy's digital drawings have come a long way since his degree show at IADT, but his art, like Gerrard's, will be fashioned by technological advancements; his wordplay, less so. At this point in time, before technological purity befalls us, McCarthy's digital drawings possess a conceptual modesty that seems career appropriate. What we can look forward to is how the young artist conceptually matures alongside the advancements of technology; and whether he rejects such advancements or not along the way. The present is bright; the future may well be brighter.

Runs till 2 November, 2013.

Notes

1 Read my Circa Magazine online review of Michael Snow's *So It Is* (1982); screened in 2009 at mother's tankstation, Dublin:

[http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5128&type=reviews&ps=publish]

James Merrigan