



## THE SIGN OF THE BROKEN SWORD

During the 1920s and 1930s, the so-called golden age of detective fiction, several attempts were made to record a set of rules for the construction of a detective story.<sup>1</sup> These were often humorous excuses for criticising unsuccessful novels and their ridiculous plot twists, or some more seriously sought to contain the outer limits of the genre. As with most attempts to define a movement which had started sometime previously<sup>2</sup> and which was still going on, these contemporary efforts flagrantly failed to impose order on the form. However, there are several characteristics that, almost a century later, have become the hallmarks of classic detective fiction – and permeate the group exhibition *I Love Those Paintings [art, natural and social science]*: the mysterious suspects, the decoding of evidence, the process of interrogation and the ubiquitous red herrings (paintings?).

Atsushi Kaga's animation, *Factory* (2009), is the first encounter with a narrative that is the back story to a character who lurks around the corner: Pretzel Man. Indeed, it is revealed that he is one of many Pretzel Men, all adopting the same disguise ("NO BEARD, NO WORK" as the sign in the factory states). For those who are familiar with his recurring role in Kaga's work, the artist may appear to be elucidating where this man comes from; but equally the similitude of workers in the factory evokes G. K. Chesterton's suggestion that the best place to hide a pebble is on a beach<sup>3</sup>. The one pretzel man whose journey we follow as he begins his working day becomes one of many, a cog in an industrial machine, objectified by his panda employers to the point where he literally transmutes into an object. Typically of Kaga's work this animation touches on issues of mass production, globalisation and cultural perception (Chinese factories, Indian call centres, the chattering classes at a gallery opening), as well as questioning the place of the individual within these larger schemata – all the while beguiling the viewer with the appearance of being a simple, black on white, animated doodle.

So, Kaga brings the viewer in to the exhibition with a character introduction, and next Pretzel Man appears in the form of three small clay models, performing together as the *Pretzel man band* (2011). They are arranged as if on stage, with miniature instruments constructed from thin cardboard. Like the animation, the home-made finish deceives, and contrasts starkly with the uniformity of the men. They echo the kitsch figures in *Factory*, but deliberately betray their handmade quality in the blobs of glue still visible, pencil marks, finger prints left in the clay, and the small splashes of colour hand painted on their boots and on the pretzel stumps growing from their heads. At first glance, positioned on a homely shelf, they might be mistaken for humorous ornamental figurines, but they are a physically symbolic continuation of the animation. Again Kaga uses the vehicle of the Pretzel Man to describe a situation (here the closed-eye musicians assemble for a silent performance); again we are provided with character, narrative, evidence; again we are left with mystery.

Chesterton's pebble wisdom continues: "Where does a wise man hide a leaf? ... 'In the forest' "<sup>4</sup> In the case of Nina Canell's film *We Lost Wind* (2007), the leaf in question is, in fact, a saxophone. The instrument is well hidden visually, although the curious sounds emitting from it fill the exhibition space. Through a series of shots, each with so little movement they appear at first as slides, Canell gradually reveals the source of the primitive noise. The traditional musicality of the saxophone is transformed into a deep-toned, squeaky, audible breath due to its position within the hollow of a tree. The musician, a solitary

anoraked figure, is initially barely perceptible in the forest as we look down on the woodland scene, and it is only briefly during the short loop of the DVD that he can be seen clearly. At that point, he looks directly into the camera and the viewer is rendered voyeur. Although what is shown may appear to be a quasi-scientific experiment, the camera angles and lack of clarity resist the notion of documentary. Rather we are allowed only to half-see what is going on through the trees, as if it is an incident stumbled across in these eerily deserted woods. If there is a scientific conclusion to be drawn from the events captured, it is not presented to the viewer, who instead must try to decipher meaning itself from the visual and audible clues. Canell's success lies in skilfully applying science in her process, but presenting as the tangible artwork the natural beauty of the residue.

The aesthetic simplicity of stratagem, sound and object echoes through the woody, plaintive tone of the saxophone and is balanced by the silent maracas of *SkyWalker* (2009). Hanging by a string looped over a roof beam, the maracas move fractionally with the movement of air through the gallery: in the viewer's proximity seeming to sway with the breath, but only just. Their potential to make sound by banging against each other is muffled by the blue knitted sock appropriated and adapted to cover just one of the maracas. Mute at the point of almost-noise, hovering at the point of almost-still, they are carefully arranged and yet tantalisingly tactile and temptingly reachable. In the remaining works of the exhibition, this becomes a dominating theme – the potential for audience participation is a further strategic balancing act between what is permitted, what is desired and what is invited.

Matt Sheridan Smith's two works offer clues from which the viewer can build a portrait of a satisfyingly identifiable man. The spotted scarf and images of a plane crash seen in *There's always something to do: part 2* (2011) combine with the repeated quote pencilled on the wall in *Fliege, Ficken* (2011) to give enough information to trace a photo-fit subject: Douglas Bader<sup>5</sup>. Yet, while the physical evidence unmistakably points to the pilot, there is ambiguity within the combined narrative. There is more than an assemblage of significant parts: *Fliege Ficken* includes an empty chair and, cascading from high on the wall, a sheet of laser printed paper, speckled with the same small dots as the scarf. The scarf is worn, threads are pulled in the fabric: clearly neither archival relic nor brand new, unnervingly introducing its owner as another unseen character in the narrative. In fact, it belonged to the artist, as familiar a part of his ensemble amongst his social group as Bader's spotted neckerchief was synonymous with him amongst his, immortalised and made public thanks to photographs and film. Games more complex than picture puzzles are being pursued by the artist. Uneasily we become aware of the uncertainty in what we see, and realise there is more still that cannot be seen. The laserjet printed images of the plane coming down, carefully positioned within the purpose-built MDF unit are only partially visible and are blurry shades of grey. The unit itself appears to be a plan-chest, but proves to be the opposite – instead of providing an open facet for display, the dark grey solidity of its balance is determined by the exact depth of each visible shelf. Seeing more than what has been predetermined is physically impossible. Echoing the monochrome scarf, each element is a tonal fit: the chair is a utilitarian, work-a-day black and metal affair. Perhaps belonging to an absent invigilator: a purposeful, possessed object and therefore forbidding. By contrast the armchair, snug in the recessed corner of the gallery is positively inviting.

David Sherry's audio CD, playing continuously through the headphones beside this chair, seems to offer a clear mystery. *What's it all about* (2012) is the title of the track suggested to the viewer. The artist gives,



David Sherry *I love those paintings* CD edition of 25 Installation view 2012

not quite an answer, but rather a series of responses, directly made about his work by others, and recited by him as a desultory list. The lack of vocal emotion as he delivers insults, praise and verbal ephemera (particularly of the kind offered by ambivalent curators towards artists), forces the listener to impose their own logic upon the comments. Equally, with his drawings on the wall behind the chair, we look for logical order where there is a series of statements, trying to equate text to image, or mentally translating sketch of potential idea into future performance. The re-stating, re-recording of gathered information lifted out of its original context is further repositioned and displaced as the drawings are invisible when sitting in the chair. Instead, from this point of view, the work of other artists is seen while absorbing these judgements on Sherry's work through the headphones. What seems like a clinical summation of feedback becomes a narcotic altering our perception of the rest of the exhibition. Just as Canell's deep saxophone aurally dominates the space, equally with the headphones on it is Sherry's soundtrack which colours interpretation. The other tracks on his CD (the *I love those paintings* that gives the exhibition its title) offer a similar rhetoric of apparently neutral statement, some accompanied by music, some performed as songs, with nonchalantly descriptive titles (*50 yelps to music* being a literal example). This open sharing of intimate recordings<sup>6</sup> (like Kaga's work, deceptively home-made and seemingly vulnerable) suggests an honesty which Sherry himself undermines with a range of comically fake accents.

Entrusting the audience of his work to choose a track, Sherry leaves room for further selection than that determined by artist and curator. Across the exhibition, gaze is directed and logic misdirected. The curatorial premise of the exhibition, the missing link to bring these works together, is their foundation in practice that uses the mechanisms and techniques of the natural and social sciences. Constructed in this way, they together stand up to analysis and deduction by the viewer, an unravelling of the artists' processes. At the dénouement, typically a golden age detective brings his key suspects together into one room – a careful curation - to reveal his solution to the mystery. Here, it is in the act of gathering itself that we find truth within the mystery, a narrative woven, fictions spun, and solutions, as in the finest classics, unsolved.

Mai Blount

<sup>1</sup> Notably, S. S. Van Dine (Willard Huntington Wright), "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories", first published in the *American Magazine* (September 1928); and Ronald A. Knox, "Decalogue: The Ten Rules of Detective Fiction" (from his introduction to) *The Best English Detective Stories of 1928, 1929*, (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929).

<sup>2</sup> Whether defined as starting with Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins or Arthur Conan Doyle.

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Chesterton, "The Sign of the Broken Sword" from *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911) in *The Complete Father Brown Stories* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2006) p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Bader (1910-1982) was an RAF pilot who lost both his legs in a plane in 1931. The quote on the wall records his radio contact as the plane, in which he was practicing stunts, hit the ground. During World War II he was hailed as a hero, and his role as heroic legend was assured with the stirring 1956 biopic *Reach for the Sky* (directed by Lewis Gilbert, starring Kenneth More).

<sup>6</sup> Not only accessible in the exhibition, but available as limited edition CD to buy or download online.







CRASHED, SLOW-MOVING, NEAR GROUND, BAD SHOW  
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Matt Sheridan Smith *There's always something to do: part 2* Painted MDF, silk wool scarf, inkjet prints 115 x 34 cm 2011  
*Fliege, Ficken* Laser print, readily available seating, handwritten text Dimensions variable 2011



David Sherry *Upsidedown Sky* Pen and watercolour on paper 29.7 x 20.6 cm 2012  
*Tree in full head blast* Pen watercolour and pencil on paper 21 x 14.8 cm 2012



tree in full head blast due to a nebulous  
launch after fragmentation.