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Herbert, Martin, *Take Your Time*, Slow Painting Exhibition Catalogue, **Hayward Gallery**, October 2019



SLOW PAINTING

regardless of how fashionable it is, with imposing forebears – with the proximity, in an illustrated art history book, say, of greatness – and wanting to create something emotive and truthful from the struggle. Because this risks self-seriousness, not infrequently Housley positions himself between sombreness and deadpan ridiculousness. His gawky portraits teeter on comedy (*Two Painters*, 2019, pl. 23); his actual wrestlers (*Slow Dance in the Long Game*, 2019, pl. 22), parallels to tortured artistry, are almost overburdened with metaphor. What he creates, resultantly, are compounds that situate painting today as both preposterous and deeply serious. Something of that is conveyed in the fact that while prospecting his lunar, pocked surfaces, you realise you are seeing only the final outcome of a long skirmishing with the motif, or perhaps with all kinds of other motifs buried beneath. This image might not have taken long to make; its slowness is embedded in the fact that it took a long time to find, and there is bathos in this too: all those prior incarnations, and what the artist deemed most worthy was, say, a boggle-eyed face of discontinuous, hectically coloured parts (*Grey Monarch*, 2019, pl. 20).

Paintings such as these constitute, at least in part, an engagement with artistic genres. Now, genre is something outwardly conservative, and as such reverting to it feels outwardly problematic. Note, though, that in the seemingly permissive environs of contemporary art it is hard for anything to create friction. Intelligently tarrying with genre might do so. Mairead O'hEocha's still lives depicted in natural history museums enact distance from the past already: a historical painter might have arrayed birds in their atelier, while she sees them through institutional glass (*Cabinet of Herons, Natural History Museum*, 2018, pl. 36). Her flowers harken back to the memento mori tradition but equally secrete, in their vessels, fragments of portraiture (*Flowers and Herakles*, 2015, pl. 38), not dissimilarly to how Japanese *ukiyo-e* painters would insert a landscape or school of carp into a kimono, a reality within a reality, both existing on the same painted plane. Meanwhile, O'hEocha's colour schemes, which often pull from other artists', offer a melee of temporalities and painted spaces. Her kaleidoscopic pastel tonalities might recall Pierre Bonnard but she paints with a controlled bravura alien to the speckling Frenchman; her flowers and foliage sometimes assume geometric overtones as if nature were turning mathematical, and her subjects can feel blazed with neon light. Most directly, though, here one faces the problem of the revenant: something returned from the past, a parti-coloured ghost. If we have never stopped caring about flowers, landscape, animals, what is the correct language, today, to frame that caring and,

conversely, our progressive estrangement from the natural? (The glass of a display case, one might say, is a screen.) The results are self-contradictions, one foot in the past and one in the now, limning a contemporary mindset.

Close in, O'hEocha's brushstrokes combust and her paintings verge on lyric abstraction. In this sense they are figurations *after* abstraction, as are Tim Stoner's Spanish landscapes and floral and arboreal still lives, where the motif is frequently just a pretext (pl. 54–56). Stoner often scrapes back his canvases to reveal the striated layers, archaeological evidence of previous sorties, buried beneath: at once a formal methodology and a pointer towards the multifarious historical layers in the places he paints, these converse unpredictably with the topmost brushwork, snagging the eye as much as the intersections between firm, swooping lines. Here one might think as much of a febrile, skidding Willem de Kooning abstraction as of classical or modern landscape painting; and of space as psychological territory as much as a physical one. The late Carol Rhodes's works (pl. 41–44), with their air of calm control as a means of subterfuge, enact another kind of double vision *vis-à-vis* the landscape. They are topographical views, for sure, in the artist's signature delicately pallid palette. But they are equally arrangements of line and carved-up space, jittery signs of human habitation in the landscape, factory roofs and industrial estates equalised with a painter's practice of dividing the canvas rectangle into interesting, elliptical segments. The longer you look, the more the picture plane pitches, yaws and switches, seesawing between flatness and depth in a disoriented manner that aligns with the ostensible subject matter.

Doubling is a tool, a delay. You may think you have the art's measure, in that it recalls something, but then – if you follow the cue of the exhibition title and wait, breathe – it veers stealthily to the expansive unknown. Athanasios Argianas's small, salient diptych paintings capsule transformation – they proffer at once modernist-tinged heads, their facture nodding to cubism, and studies of old-fashioned, high-end microphones (pl. 5–6). Argianas, whose practice also incorporates sculpture and canon-based song, is additionally a trained musician, and these paintings suggest a passage between vision and sound, image and language, that is reinforced by their being paired. Something, it is implied, crackles in the gap between repeated takes on the motif. Moving from the first image to the second does not unlock the work but bounces us back to the first; it suggests meaning lies in the emphasised process of change itself and the sustained pinballing subjectivity of reception. Simon Ling's multipart image of skeletons, or *a* skeleton repeated, is explicitly concerned with the act of

MAIREAD O'HEOCHA



36. Mairead O'hEocha, *Cabinet of Herons*, Natural History Museum, 2018





38. Mairead O'hEocha, *Flowers and Herakles*, 2015

Slow Painting presents the work of 19 primarily British and UK-based artists whose work explores ideas around the concept of 'slowness' and what it might mean in relation to contemporary painting: how it might be present in the making of the work, how the works reveal themselves slowly, and how they fit into the continuum of art history.

Acting as a counterbalance to an increasingly accelerating world, painting offers a space of pause, contemplation and gradual unfurling, for both the painter and the viewer. Spanning diverse approaches, from figuration to abstraction and somewhere in between, *Slow Painting* surveys painting's role as a rewarding repository of time.

With an original essay by curator and writer Martin Herbert, alongside lavish reproductions of the artworks exhibited, this publication also includes a roundtable discussion between a number of the artists and art critic Hettie Judah.

Artists included are Darren Almond, Athanasios Argianas, Michael Armitage, Gareth Cadwallader, Varda Caivano, Lubaina Himid, Paul Housley, Merlin James, Allison Katz, Simon Ling, Lucy McKenzie, Mairead O'hEocha, Yelena Popova, Carol Rhodes, Sherman Mern Tat Sam, Benjamin Senior, Michael Simpson, Tim Stoner and Caragh Thuring.

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