

Tony Swain
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These paintings announce themselves by way of titles that appear to use that curiously reduced language of newspaper headlines. The ambiguity of this language has unlikely poetic potential (Peter Smithson wrote a text about design in the eighties that listed the contents of his cupboards) and in this show there are similar devices of familiarity reframed as something new and strange. As the works are made with newspaper, parts must be either obliterated or allowed to remain amongst the queasy layers of paint. Swain makes visible this studious balancing act, bringing his activity and the original images into a kind of wobbly union. In newspapers the images are necessarily informed by the text, they become an odd non sequitur when they meet the new singsong artwork names that Swain gives them. He takes these dual elements as parameters for a self-constructed problem; the work manifests itself as compendiums of conundrums solved. Part of its illusive appeal is being tempted to do some detective work with what remains of the original page but in glimpsing a starting point it is impossible to perceive the whole puzzle.

Newsprint, with its fragility and potential to fade and warp, is a tool for Swain. Having selected his method he has gone about attaining a familiarity with it that has become as intimate as a watchmakers understanding of tiny mechanised movements. Time is something you sense in seeing this collection exhibited. Again the amount of work has set parameters, as if he is representing a fixed amount of days worth of news and having more work would mean an extra Monday or Tuesday edition. This spread of days results in different outcomes, opportunities for new problems that come with new layouts as the new painted images are dictated by the, mainly, photographic images. Swain brings a feeling for passing time to the photographs, adding more than he takes away and fixing parts of the image to receive more attention.

Moving across the page, solving each compositional proposition as it happens, seems to record Swain's actions, map his decisions. In Georges Perec's *Life a User's Manual* (1978) the Bartlebooth character sets himself similar challenges, setting aside ten years to learn to paint in order to begin recording ports around the world for twenty years, these are then sent back and made into jigsaws which are then dismantled and filed in boxes. This is as close to collage as Swain's work comes; the pieces are always one image whilst having myriad moments buried in them as if they were a jigsaw assembled from mismatched parts. Before Bartlebooth sets out Perec describes how he will, 'set out to execute a (necessarily limited) programme right the way through, in all its irreducible, intact entirety'. That the jigsaw is a means of making a narrative that all the time announces its constructedness is central to Perec's writing and finding a similar means to an end is central to Swain's endeavour.

There is a pervading, melancholic certainty to Swain's work, a certainty built around the inextricable incoherence of things. These paintings are frozen moments in a process that acknowledges that paper is a relic of petrified memory and so is full of rapturous gaps, forgetfulness and selectivity. It makes you struggle to reassemble the paintings, matching imperceptible differences in colour with certain types of decisions, as if the closer to black the paint that obliterates an image is, the more certain it is. Usually this is merely to draw attention to an image part, barricading in a photograph with colour.

You get a sense of some of Bartlebooth's relics in works like *Bias Theory* (2006) and *Sower for More* (2006) where the palette is all washed out pink browns bisected by fences with serrated tops like the borders of Bartlebooth's jigsaws. Swain's fragile works with their frayed edges seem to use this to avoid the decisiveness of a straight line. Attempting to make writing and painting seem indistinguishable is built into these stylistic devices. For all its cap-doffing quietness the work, when taken as a whole, ingratiates its way into your consciousness. It questions the neutrality of newspaper as a support in a sly critique of the idea of the veracity of reports we read. Swain has ponderously moved across these sheets, inspecting each detail, walking the page like a landscape of psychedelically mutating features and captured specimens for us to try and group into new species with their new names.

Mick Peter