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"Perfume"

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Imagine the colours being mixed. A bucket of basic white being stirred by an intense drop of experience... Then coat the walls, clothe them with the idea of colour.\textsuperscript{1}

The works in this exhibition are not frozen. Their stories undulate and move. The relationships established between the diverse paintings and texts create spaces and tensions. These works do not always appear comfortable together, nor do they need to. Feelings and emotions run fast and through them, erased as quickly as they appear. As viewers we grasp at their passing, or spurt as we breathe in their closure.

Pages and paintings generate spaces of activity, where basic white is always stirred by experience. In Beyond the Surface, three painters and one writer present these visual spaces as fragments that unfold before the viewer. Travelling between the paintings and words in this exhibition, we find ourselves in seemingly exotic places and other worlds, watching feeling half-lives which are often pervaded by the perfumes of earlier thoughts or memories.

Each painting becomes a time-zone, slowing the act of looking to a distinctive pace. Some works clamour for attention; while others wait their turn. Kim Pieters' Insectarium is the miniature made large. Colour is spread and amplifed across metres of softly scored board. This chromatic field engulfs a second before focus shifts and it fades to nothing. Almost invisible in its detail, Insectarium raises the question whether colour is ever meant to be viewed on this scale. The painting discloses a process of simultaneous expansion and evaporation. Flickering between tiny lyrical events and an immersive vapour of color, it becomes both a single flower and an entire summer.

Maryrow Crook's painting Show Ponies has a different sense of movement. Here the image is half-hidden beneath a mist of feathery grey paint. It could be late afternoon, that moment when the weather has packed up and everyone has left the fairgrounds. The focus of the painting is a pregnancy gassy merry-go-round, apparently haunted by the fading sounds of a music box. Each horse is covered by a shroud, doubling the sense of a dream-like stasis, a sleepwalking slowness. A faint melancholy rises from the scene—a feeling of childhood lost, of pleasures stalled—but there is also a magical levity and wit. The horses seem both frozen in motion and galloping blindly forward, the carousel, either anchored on solid ground or turning through some cloudy space of dream.
In all of these painted spaces, the certainties of the 'real'—of the found board surfaces on which Pieters paints, of the seemingly solid landscapes in which Cook and Pick stage their dramas—are destabilised by drifts of memories and associations, patterns and dreams. The works have an evanescent, a quality of shimmering. No sooner have stories and meanings appeared than they are swept away by our next glance. The exhibition explores the hesitation and uncertainty of the partially spoken thought. Half-whispers pervade. Pieters explores this poetics of absence and silence in the lover who does not forget sometimes dies of excess, exhaustion and tension of memory. Across the multiple panels there is unexpected movement. Shapes emerge and travel. Within this continual flux, meaning and knowing become difficult laws to grasp. The 'lover' might be the artist, the viewer, or a body evoked by Pieters' ambiguous markings. There is nothing superficial to this surface. Trajectories can be traced without a need for their source, and our desires become the subject of the work.

Each painting in Beyond the Surface is home to images and associations, but each new viewer also overlays it with memories and ideas. Seraphine Pick's Don't Tell me I'm the one that's got to change is a fuse of strange and discomforting signs and images, as if Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights were re-imagined for the talk show age. Seated in the foreground is a bokin-clad woman whose body is partially that of a broken mannequin. Plants sprout from her shoulders, and behind her is a host of dreams and appetitions: flowers, suburban homes, a cut-out tree, all looming and receding in a field of colour that suggests both blood and flame. The toothy face at her shoulder could be encouraging her either to look back or stand her ground. Perhaps this is a record of lost lovers. Or is the woman growing into new life in the wake of some trauma or damage?

In Maryrose Cook's Winter, Nantandum (The air, not to be mentioned) the past is literally a storehouse. Locked within a suite of three nineteenth century cabinets are objects ranging from the occult to the ordinary. Among this hoard are beads, a rib cage, a wasp nest, a hand and a tongue. In the foreground lies a brave intruder that is also a woman's torso, a hole where her reproductive organs should be. The earth below her is alive with cells and constrictions, as if the floral patterns on a domestic carpet have begun to writh with organic energy. Beyond all this, the sky rolls and follows above a fiercely powdered topky forest. Nothing in this uncanny tableau seems to have developed naturally. There is a similar uncertainty in Cook's Where the highway takes the strange barque with chicken-head and fish tail glides across a huge and fluid landscape. A creature such as this would be unable to survive either on land or in the sky. There is a sense of still time and journeys temporarily halted. In both Pick's and Cook's works, the timeframe is not that expected of history, of events following each other in a linear sequence. Instead these paintings suggest the jumbled storehouse of memory, where events commingle and spawn new images.
Kim Pieters' paintings encode memory in a different way. The board on which she paints suggests the walls of vacated rooms, scarred by human habitation. Le mal d'archive might be seen, then, as a reflection on our obsessive desire to retain information, to read the traces of history with certainty and make them visible. It also reflects on the impossibility of total recall, and our futile attempts to freeze time in collections and archives. The marks and blurs in the surface may be dual, marking an attention to the kind of details that are found in the seldom-visited corners of libraries. If there are stories to be found in these surfaces, they do not, to use Jean baudrillard's phrase, "have a day after, they are made to be used up." Each new viewing yields a new story.

Pick's shelf of Earthly Possessions offers an archive of yet another kind. These possessions may be disguised in white paint, but unlike most found objects they do not await some new use. Cameras, tape decks, telephones—all of these are devices for storing information and recording the past. Pick has cancelled the objects' functions and embellished them with traces of the lives they once led. Grandmother's knitting hands can be found on the radio beside which she sat for years. The lovers have mutated to occupy the device on which they once played. And a woman waits desperately for a call from the very telephone she is painted on. Here owners have morphed into the things they possess. The objects seem to declare the impossibility of fulfilling our desires through consumer objects, but they also imbue ordinary things with some of the potency of relics.

In Beyond the Surface much is found in imaginary spaces. The atmospheres generated will, inevitably, be uncomfortable for some. Feedback loops out from the image to the viewer, drawing them in to become part of the system being observed. By entering the illusion, losing ourselves within intervals, disruptions, fissures and folds, viewers can step beyond the surface. What is seen in the image is fed directly to what we observe, our imagination. Thus the paintings are tied to their surfaces and their viewers, moving, undulating, in-between. Neither real nor virtual, but both, each producing and defining the other.

Beyond the Surface is a cluster of changing elements which resist reduction to a common denominator or essential core. Interspace is all. Like perfume, these paintings are at once seductive and deceptive. Perfume heightens the appeal of the body's surfaces, drawing us in. But perfume can also camouflage things unpleasant or unsettling. And there are times when a perfume can overpower, its closeness can turn sweetness to sickness. Our individual response depends on our histories and memories of the scent, which can take us to other worlds—imaginary spaces of desire. A painting is always a space of excess: colour exudes more than it denotes, shape implies more than it describes. This perfumed excess opens new possibilities of desire, dream and memory.

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