

Hidden

Catherine Ferguson, February 2014

Hidden: An essay to accompany an exhibition of works by John McDowall and Tim Renshaw, Wild Pansy Press space, Old Mining Building, University of Leeds LS2 9JT March 4th – March 28th 2014

The viewer is invited into the intimate space of the small Gallery to find bookworks by John McDowall and small paintings by Tim Renshaw. Beyond the immediate desire to compare and contrast two distinct forms of practice there is, perhaps, the opportunity to read each practice through the other. The aim of this brief essay is to elaborate that process by bringing insights and critical terms developed in one form of practice to open up thinking in the other.

A book is picked up (this book: *story of the time*): a collection of found images that depict the act by which they are seen; images (film stills?) that have been cropped to frame the hands that hold the open book. A space is opened up through this repetition that is physical as much as psychological. This is a space *between the eye and the hand* created through a mechanism of reversal and reflexivity; the eye sees a depiction of its own action and the hand feels the physical reality of the image it holds. With no apparent chronological order that would give narrative direction to the sequence of images (a sequence nevertheless) and, in an effort to read the book, the pages are flicked back and forth. Although we recognise the subject of the images, if not their source, we become aware of the image as reproduction, as photograph of a moment in the past. Through an awareness of the mediated image other material considerations become apparent: the thin and transparent paper through which is revealed the unfamiliar trace of the image seen from the reverse side; a strange after-image that interrupts and intervenes in the sequence of images of which it is the trace.

Another book *Atramentum*. From the blank page to the black page and in varying proportions in between black ink covers and divides the surface with a hard, curved edge that can almost be felt and in places mimics the shadow or bend of the opened pages. The ink lies on the surface, waxy, thick; catching the light but with a matte finish, creating reflections across the symmetrical line of the binding. Searching for meaning (like the melancholic scholars in Borges' *The Library of Babel*) and finding a clue at the back of the book another spatial conundrum is worked out in the imagination: an exact calculation of a specific surface area of ink becomes an exact volume of viscous black liquid which is used up to print onto another surface a motif (that symbolically and technically represents the source text), that becomes, without losing a drop to the printing process, the pages of a new book.

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Without a narrative inside the book, outside the book a narrative begins with the reader who picks it up. Each book is conceived in material terms prior to execution; as the materialisation of invisible lines drawn between aspects of the historical and contemporary practices of reading, writing and making books. The underlying idea is not fully disclosed by the book, but once clues are revealed the experience of the work changes for the words can never be unsaid. However, this “story” about the work is not simply the answer to a riddle - so that once known any fascination with the book is over. Indeed, although specific ideas underpin each book and clearly and logically connect up to form a closed system, it is through handling and inspecting the book that the narrative is refigured and opened up; never to be grasped at once (as if there were a beginning, middle and end). Nor is this story an irrelevance or prop -as if the work should stand alone without it. To the contrary, the story is folded into the encounter with the work, variously as incomprehension, pause, touch, desire, self-consciousness, curiosity etc. which give way to a growing awareness that everything about the book is highly significant; that each material decision is a clue that connects the narrative elements in a different way, from a *different perspective* each time the book is picked up. The reader is aware of the physicality of the book, not as simply as a form or as a collection of sense perceptions, but as an object whose qualities envelop a ‘potential’ that looks backwards, as it were (for example, the weight of paper chosen to make a prayer book portable or the history/volume of the library translated into a quantity of ink etc.) but that also look forward to be developed by other forces, in thoughts yet to come.

Accordingly, the underlying idea could never be fully disclosed by the book (not least because they are made of different stuff) and the significance of the story is not to reveal what hides behind the work. The story always stays outside, parallel to the work; it draws attention to ‘the book’ as implicitly relative and contingent, without universal value as a unique object, without universal meaning as content. The story (retold through the voice) informs the reader, but not about the truth of the work; it repeats a conventional function of the book but as an absence within the book, and in so doing figures our expectation and belief that through the book we can make sense of the world.

Materials have an equally integral role in Tim Renshaw’s works. Notably the aluminium surface has more in common with the plane of a page than the object that is the stretched canvas. The thin metal sheet envelops a utilitarian world of industrial production and mechanical and technical purpose rather than the tradition of Fine Art practice. Oil paint also envelops a potential that looks to its past development from hand-made mix of natural pigments and organic medium to mass produced ready-made tubes and a history of use dictated by the versatility of its specific qualities; pigments made from natural minerals, the flexibility of its mediums, the way it absorbs, refracts and

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reflects light and the speed at which it dries. These paintings envelop that pace of working with oil paint, which involves a slow accumulation of layers or the removal of unwanted layers and beginning again. Significantly as abstract painting developed towards the 1960s artists abandoned oil paint (as well as the easel) with the invention of acrylic paint that was quick drying and could be used on unprimed canvas. The plastic water-based mediums structured a different kind of painting which was much more immediate; suited to series (the "one-off") and over-painting rather than pre-planning compositions, glazes, scraping off paint etc.

Of a certain size and typically with a central division Tim Renshaw's paintings suggest the unfinished surface of the open notebook. Contrary to the familiar idea that abstract painting creates purely optical spaces with no connection with the outside world, it is as if these paintings extract the notebook from the chaos and flux of the continuum of the everyday (and so, in contrast to the representational hypothesis, they include everything else in life not chosen). The lack of figuration reinforces the idea that it is the internal space of the notebook that structures the work rather than the note-book conceived of as an object in space. This internal space of the book is one that invites the hand-written note, whose pages become filled over time, are turned over sequentially, read/written from left to right. The paintings capture and transfer the forces enveloped within such an object; not as an inventory of characteristics that we might observe but as an object that is experienced through being handled and touched.

This 'haptic' seeing, which links the hand and the eye, becomes transformed into a pictorial structure. This is an incremental process that begins and ends with each touch of the brush (or pull of masking tape); a process that differentiates the mass of stuff in the paint pot or on the palette according to its mix of natural pigments and mediums, its viscosity, density, luminosity etc. The broadly geometric format of the paintings follow the format of the open book; in some instances an approximate symmetry mimics the flip of the page or perhaps the after-image of one side superimposed on the other. The lack of gesture or explicit touch of the artist's hand might lead to the conclusion that these paintings are planned in advance according to a pre-determined outcome. However, the degradation of the surface in places (an index of removing masking tape) is symptomatic of an ad hoc process which does not work towards an image totalised by a distant and mastering gaze. In their arbitrariness, these events are non-compositional acts of chance and blindness in respect of the whole. They repeat the closeness of the hand that writes in the notepad and speak of a process of layering, obliteration, effacement. Like a palimpsest, the surface of the painting is not read in the order it was painted, but the attention of the eye, informed by tactile

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experience, is caught by various 'frictions' across the surface which figure different (haptic) translations from the three dimensional to the two dimensional. Various and in different paintings there are; clusters of vertical lines around the edges that imply (rather than depict) the planes of underlying pages, a suggestion of the physical act of printing through mis-registration, the suggestion of architectural (unoccupied)space— imagined or remembered not as an image but through a tactile, corporeal resonance working through the image. The spatial metaphor does not unfold these works (neither as a window on the world nor as an optical space whose continuity depends upon the exclusion of the tactile space of association or illusion). It would be more accurate to describe this space as one of inscription that moves back and forth across the surface; a form of pictorial space that is not grasped as a whole but created incrementally across the surface; nothing more than a surface created on an invisible support.

Encountered together in the exhibition the viewer is invited to engage with these works in physically different ways but also to move between the registers of the visual and the tactile: to view paintings with book in hand and to move between the pages of the book in sight of the painted surface fastened to the wall.

Furthermore, through such a juxtaposition there is the idea that this is not simply a matter of comparison but that within each work the visual and the tactile operate together and create works that are non-totalisable and open. Underpinning the importance of the material structure of both artists' works (experienced as both tactile and optical) is an absence: the absent story that would link the elements of the idea that underpin John McDowall's books, the absent spatial metaphor that would link the elements of Tim Renshaw's surfaces to form a definitive and representational image. To the contrary the materiality of the work becomes insistent in its freedom from a clear purpose; as it simultaneously looks to the past (as an envelopment of past material processes) and to future interpretations; of thoughts yet to come.

Key Texts:

Foucault, Michel	'Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside' in <i>Foucault/Blanchot</i> (New York, 1987)
Massumi, Brian	<i>A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia</i> , (Massachusetts 1993)
Ropars-Wuilleumier, Marie-Claire	'Image or Time? The Thought of the Outside in <i>The Time-Image</i> (Deleuze and Blanchot)' in <i>Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy</i> (Minnesota, 2010) ed D N Rodowick