



Jack Otway - LEONARD

15 March - 26 April 2019

Thursday to Saturday 12-6 pm and by appointment

Opening reception

Friday 15 March, 6-9pm

Jack Otway's paintings are part of an ongoing chain of association and meaning; the flesh-like surface of the canvas is treated as if it could become an inhabitable space, a porous centre of autobiography and myth. Otway's subject is repeatedly removed and reworked as though held within an imaginary continuum that relies on the artist, a figure who combines and separates meaning in equal measure. Leonard is the reverential demon of nocturnal orgies and master of ceremonious unification. He is used as a caricature for the artist who orchestrates lurid and queasy-looking scenes by superimposing on and amalgamating a selection of otherwise unrelated material. Many of these works begin as recognisable images, selected from art history. Otway plays with recognition as a framework for understanding, or at least depicting, the lurking presence of something unformed, uncanny and, therefore, repeatedly attempted, rephrased and eradicated. Coming out of this cycle are provisions, of a sort, towards a new structure that threatens to change, disappear or slip once more into obscurity. We may understand these paintings as a platform for exploring the boundaries between representation and the material of paint, at once an apparatus for the synchronous production and disassemblage of images.

Otway destroys, appends, restructures and alters the spectre of his source material through a combination of erasure and accretion. Whole sections of the canvas are effaced or concealed by Otway's removal and layering of paint. In effect, Otway creates a conceptual veil

as a way of simultaneously obscuring and disambiguating content, demonstrating the qualities of paint at the precipice of forming or destroying what can be seen. This can be compared to the surrealist *Frottage* technique, bringing out the uneven surfaces and qualities of an object by rubbing at it, physically transferring one form onto another. Otway's paintings imbibe the same spirit of conversion: impressions of well-known paintings are used as the foundations for new and intriguing structures, bearing the ghost-like trace of their origins. In one painting, the figure of Caravaggio's *Narcissus* is seen in the midst of a pigmented haze while a rectangular sheath covers a cropped and rotated study of Henri Matisse's *Dessert: A Meditation in Red*, in another. We might read Narcissus's murky reflection and the faded outline of Matisse's interior as a totem for the instability of each stolen image; every painting has been over-written and manipulated, violently removed or displaced from its source.

Just as Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image, is unable to recognise his appearance as the object of his own desire, Otway negotiates the uncanny potential of each painting by exploring and complicating thresholds of representation, figuration and abstraction. On the one hand, these operative systems intertwine subtly as the layering technique creates a potentially binding and consolidating space for contradictory forms to hide or resurface. Seemingly heavy layers of paint are waded through or wiped away to reveal figurative forms, landscapes and still-life underneath; realistic shapes commingle with clouds of substance and absurdity. Otway exaggerates this difference, the gulf between realism and abstraction, by compressing and flattening these boundaries into a navigable space. We are given a figurative representation of Narcissus's face, remarkable for its clarity of expression, while his reflection is reduced to a series of gestures, brush-strokes only vaguely recognisable as features. Rather than breaking down these dualities, Otway's mark-making is a whimsical play on the possibility of merging these seemingly divergent ideas. Married to a sense of uneasy circularity, Otway's compositions delay and warp our ability to categorise what is represented.

Although many of Otway's paintings begin with images taken from the past, these reproductions contain a trace of what the critic Hal Foster has called 'mimetic exacerbation', that is, any work of art that inflates or distorts its subject to the point of parody. This technique is perhaps epitomised by Otway's reference to the nineteenth-century *Dictionnaire Infernal*, a catalogue of demons compiled by the French writer Jacques Collin Plancy. In 1836, having recently consolidated his Roman Catholic beliefs, Plancy commissioned the artist Louis Breton to illustrate his descriptions of demons, of which there are sixty five. Breton's illustrations incorporate the full breadth of Plancy's descriptions and render demons as amalgams of human body-parts and bestial traits, positioned within a series of situations as if posing for their portrait. While Otway alludes to a number of actual demons taken from the *Dictionnaire Infernal* – including Leonard, namely – he also uses Breton's etchings in the abstract, as a framework for thinking and forming an approach to composition. Taking visual cues from le Breton's decision to accommodate a range of actions and conditions within a single body or setting, Otway uses the surface area of the canvas as a space for whimsical combinations of material and autobiography.

In many of these paintings, Otway frames his subject by wiping away a thin layer of translucency indicating the prominence of the base layer or original image. In so doing, he foregrounds the self-reflexive qualities of each painting. Otway's work is about the moment of painting itself and questions the speed, quality and structure of these transmutations: the smooth passage of material into shape and discernible characters. Otway is subsumed into each closed system—the paintings hold onto and enclose an array of objects, either subjugated or shown.

Olivia Fletcher, 2019

Jack Otway (b.1991) graduated in Fine Art from The University of Leeds in 2015 (First Class Hons). Recent solo exhibitions include: 'Corn Starch Inside a Leather Pouch Makes the Sound of Snow Crunching' (2018), Assembly House, Leeds, UK; 'Check In. Relax. Take A Shower' (2017), Peter von Kant, London; 'Peddling Sinister Runic Humbug' (2017), Griffin Gallery Perimeter Space, London. Recent group exhibitions include 'Nail Biter' (2018), The Rectory Projects, London; 'Ultra Sunrise' (2017), Set Studios, London curated by It's Kind of Hard to Explain and MILK; 'Instant Karma' (2017), Achenbach Hagemeyer, Dusseldorf, Germany. Residencies and awards include: Project Based Residency, Griffin Gallery, London (2016); APT Graduate Studio Award, London (2016); Into the Wild, Professional Development Programme, Chisenhale Studios, London (2015–2016); Harbour Studio Residency, Floating Island Gallery, London (2015–2016); The Alan Mohun Memorial Prize,

University of Leeds (2015); FUAM Art Prize, University of Leeds (2015). Publications include XL Catlin Art Guide (2016) and Looking at Painting Vol. II (2016).

Olivia Fletcher is a writer and current student of 'Critical Writing in Art and Design' at the Royal College of Art. Having graduated from Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge in 2016, she has worked on a variety of projects, both curatorial and in writing. Most recently, Olivia was Writer-in-Residence at Rule Gallery in Marfa, TX. For her other words and thoughts, visit: viaolive.wordpress.com

For all further information please contact the gallery.

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