

AT Biltereyest Judy Darragh, Fergus Feehily, Selina Foote, Rohan Hartley Mills, Noel Ivanoff, John Nixon, Kim Pieters, Glen Snow

Curated by Rohan Hartley Mills & Glen Snow

“My collaborator Glen Snow and I had the idea for this show back in 2013. Our aim was to bring together local and international artists that we felt addressed the idea of painting as ‘object’ in their practice. As fellow painter-builders, we set about putting this exhibition together, to engage in a contemporary dialogue in painting conducted on an international level. Materialised presents a selection of working processes that highlight the subtleties of building a painting within the language of abstraction. Some of the chosen works reveal expressive qualities whilst remaining minimal. Others feature sculptural propositions executed with a painter’s sensibility. These accents, when brought together demonstrate a collective appreciation of painting that step outside of its accustomed marker of the picture-as-a-window. These paintings are to be looked at rather than looked into or through.”

–Rohan Hartley Mills, March 2017

It is the contention of this exhibition that such contemporary painters as AT Biltereyest, Judy Darragh, Fergus Feehily, Selina Foote, Rohan Hartley Mills, Noel Ivanoff, John Nixon, Kim Pieters, and myself, Glen Snow, extend the grounds for understanding painting practice materially: as object. Such painting, focused in on its matter, might be termed the pictureobject.

Materialised is a small showing of nine artists brought together to frame a discussion of the material aspects of their work. As a title, it suggests what has become manifest, been made physically perceptible, or become fact before us. This is the real, realised after a process involving actions and responses to materials being handled. The realisation of each small reality is a continual give and take that embodies artist and materials as if in ‘negotiation,’ so that issues of agency are borne through the work and the body of the artist and back again.

The paintings gathered here all work without the representations of observable objects. Yet rather than resorting to familiar handles such as abstract painting or non-objective art, I am preferring to think of them as picture objects. They all insist, after all, on occupying the wall as a register of the picture plane. Yet in resisting any explicit picturing of objects they have become the thing to be pictured before us, the object itself.

Artist Robert Ryman had preferred to reference his work as “realist”^[1] for the way they occupied space and made the light and walls of rooms adjuncts to their constitution. The pictureobjects of this room are real in that way, and yet they also seem to know that matter is the stuff that pictures are made of. Connotation, if not illusion, is brought into proximity.

Materialised, as the exhibition title, would also seem to situate the work within a renewed discourse of materialism. On the one hand, there is the material value of the object as traced through the signs of the artist’s body, and on the other a materialism that can be understood as having its own force or vitality. For the first point, I will discuss the ideas of art critic and theorist Isabelle Graw, and on the second, political theorist, Jane Bennett’s notions of ‘vibrant matter’ will be touched on.

Questions of material value will remind us that Marxist theory would not have seen painting as operating any differently than other commodities in the market. Yet if, as since Marx’s first formulations, art is positioned as the production of significances, its value moves from the frame of economic use, exchange and surplus. Art objects might be better understood as part

of “a productive activity in which actual materials are transformed in order to communicate, or invite the consumption of, immaterialities such as images, feelings and ideas.”^[2] Art critic and theorist Isabelle Graw echoes this in thinking about the economy of art generally, and in redefining the commodity of painting in particular.

In the first instance, the art economy is understood as centred, not in the value of the market but, through its circulation of symbolic value: its ability to mean and not just be of monetary means.^[3] She underscores that the Marxist conception of value was never confused with the idea of price, thus opening value as a different kind of socially negotiated marker. Regarding painting then, there is a sense where the immaterialities of its facture, their connotation as sign, are what is acquired, but that this is also done along with “the artist’s labour capacity ... therefore owning a slice of her life.”^[4] Something of the person is embodied in the materialities of its facture as well.

In seeking terms for the contemporary condition of painting, Graw makes comparisons to where modernist definitions have long left off. In contrast to such old formalisms, painting is now accepted as undetermined, certainly undisciplined by medium – she would say ‘medium-unspecific,’^[5] – and always pending the possibilities of a range of materialities. Having resolved that any purity of medium cannot be the locus of definition, Graw better determines painting as the production of signs, with codes and gestures that point particularly to the embodied forces that brought them into production. This is their indexicality, and it is Charles Peirce’s sign of the index that she elaborates for painting.

The index reveals something about the object through its physical proximity. Causation, contact, or touch are forces of the index, and in connecting with the object indicate, point to, or record the thing it is contiguous with. “What we encounter in painting is not so much the authentically revealed self of the painter, but rather signs that insinuate that this absent self is somewhat present in it.”^[6] Graw takes up something of anthropologist “Alfred Gell’s definition of artworks as ‘indexes of agency.’”^[7] Here she investigates how index infers the agency behind it and even imparts that agency to the work like a part-persona or ‘quasi-person.’

To Graw’s sense of agency as remainder or trace via indexical signs of the artist’s subject-presence, I am wanting to additionally infer the ‘agencies’ of materials themselves. In a recent essay^[8] I explored how, the political theorist, Jane Bennett’s inquiries might contribute to an understanding of the materialism foregrounded in particular art works. Bennett’s book, *Vibrant Matter*, joins a number of recent publications and research interests that are giving voice to a renewed interest in materialism^[9]. This is a materialist view influenced in large part by perspectives offered in quantum physics that have shifted how reality might be philosophically understood. As Bennett immediately points out in addressing her own philosophical and political interests, however, there is still a core idea in society that matter is divisible into vibrant, animated subjects and beings, on the one hand, and the passive stuff of dull objects and things, on the other. They form a type of life/matter binary that enables people to partition experience as either animate or inert. In pulling apart such binaries, Bennett hopes to reveal what is discounted within its frame: “the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations.”^[10] Her first illustration here is how people’s moods can be influenced by omega-3 fatty acids, “or the way our trash is not ‘away’ in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane.”^[11]

What falls outside her political concerns, and yet is implied in the way she initially sets up her argument are the operations of aesthetics and aesthetic thought. The place of matter in art itself has a particular history connected to ideas of anti-form, the automatic and chance. There are many artists who have long pursued within their practices ideas that would find strong alliances among the recent re-thinking of materialism.

Bennett attempts to revise the usual connection of matter to mechanism. She avoids supplying matter with an additive ‘life force,’ but recognises a catalysing field of consequences when certain materialities are in combination, which points beyond mere mechanism. A materialism understood as mechanistic puts the inanimate, ‘dead’ or ‘dumb’

stuff into use or action for the sentient and alive. The locus of vital activity and agency remains squarely in the domain of subjects. Materials and mediums deployed within art works, on the whole, are enabled by the able artistry of subjects and as such remain understood as determinable, and therefore deterministic. As a framework for understanding the relations of artist to matter, it would seem to fall short.

Such a framing is the hylomorphic compound, the substance recognised as a combination of its matter (hulê) and form (morphê), but where it is the form that specifies what matter is. In this still Aristotelean formula, “the substance of a thing is its form.”^[12] Form is both what names the shape matter takes, and is the design imposed – or more metaphysically, “the form is found in the soul of the artisan”^[13] who gives this form to the house they build, or mould they make. While Aristotle understood hylomorphic production as applicable to ideas of art, he extrapolated from this scheme to chart a theory on the very nature of being. More recently, the work of philosopher Gilbert Simondon has impressed upon the meditations of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari that “the hylomorphic model leaves many things, active and affective, by the wayside.”^[14] Bennett’s own search for affectivity within matter itself, outside its form, might be understood as her looking through the excluded stuff along this wayside.

The pictureobject, as a focus of material value, appears as a repository of indexes imparting their agency of persona. Graw sees this as part of how painting faces us with having some of its own agency like ‘quasi-persons.’ “This is why painting can be potentially experienced as being intriguing in a way that only an intriguing person could be.”^[15] Bringing Bennett to bear on this

work is, in addition, an attempt to understand matter as having an affectivity or intrinsic vitality compositional of stuff – both inside and beside ourselves. This is the basis of re-appraising the art which makes use of matter: where it has been allowed to escape the imposition of form to find composition as material. In terms that reconfigure the hylomorphic, this could be construed, “less a form capable of imposing properties upon a matter than material traits of expression constituting affects.”^[16] Such a distinction being made here is of an art which allows for its non-signifying forces as well.

Glen Snow, March 2017

[1] Suzanne P. Hudson, *Robert Ryman: Used Paint* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: October Books, MIT Press, 2009), p. 10.

[2] Terry Smith, “Production,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. 364.

[3] Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (Berlin, New York: Sternberg Press, 2010).

[4] Isabelle Graw, “The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons,” in *Thinking Through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency Beyond the Canvas* (Frankfurt, Main: Sternberg Press, 2012), p. 46-7.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[8] This is an unpublished dissertation called, “Reconsidering Materialism in Art via an Aesthetics of Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter.”

[9] Her book is listed as a key text amongst others, for instance, on the research site “New Materialisms in Contemporary Art,” for the Sydney College of Arts, at The University of Sydney.

[10] Jane Bennett, “Preface,” in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. vii.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] S. Marc Cohen, “Aristotle’s Metaphysics: 8. Substances as Hylomorphic Compounds,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified June 15, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “1227: *Treatise On Nomadology – The War Machine.*” *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 408.