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Put Downs And Suck Ups: Matthew Collings' Weekly Ventings On The Art World No 2: Get Splashing – Laura Owens At Sadie Coles, London

clock2.jpg

A card arrived for the Laura Owens exhibition. It was a light pencil scribble like a genius might do. A genius doesn't have to put any effort into anything. Who does she think she is! Nothing grotesque happened at the private view. "Would you like to stay for some credit crunch sausages, Matthew?" "Yes please."

Inside the door of the gallery was a painting version of the drawing on the invite: a clock. It had many different types of brushy marks from little staccato dabs to broad flat watery blotches, and the mostly pale colours were subtly coordinated. But the image that the effects were hung on was oddly feeble. I couldn't tell what the feebleness was for; was it a joke about imagery, or was it actually not intended to read as feeble?

The clock hands were made of cut out paper like a child's artwork: little sections of some felt-like material were at the centre. They were grey-green. It was obvious there was some colour sense to the whole painting, but I didn't want to engage. I felt despised, because I felt I was being given some kind of ironic message about the foolishness of anyone who might have ever taken anything seriously that happened in art, so I despised it back.

Opposite was a much bigger work: a wave of shocking pink. Areas of raw linen seemed like a positive colour, a green that almost glowed, not just an empty space: this was impressive. The broadly washed-on slightly different shades of pink were confusing. How was I supposed to react? I saw various marks the broad strokes made but I didn't know if they were supposed to be structural – they didn't seem to be. Here and there in the flat expanse were a number of self-conscious tailored single daubs of thick paint, which looked nice – but I could never live with this painting because there was something wrong with it. What was it? Too glib: getting to an effect of freshness too fast. That's what I thought. But I also thought: this should be nothing but actually it's enjoyable.

Downstairs was a painting "of" a mother and child. The lines that let you know what the sign for the subject might be like if you ever had the energy to actually bother doing it. Again like the clock it seemed to be a self-mocking picture and I didn't know why I had to get involved. Another painting in the same room featured an outside vase of flowers. I felt there was something different here but I wasn't sure what it was, and I started to wonder if there wasn't more to everything I'd seen. It was quite a large size; the intensity of some blob-shapes dispersed around the space made it read like an abstract painting from a distance, rather than the figurative painting that it also clearly was. The Mother and Child picture simply didn't have the power of abstraction that this one had.

I looked for some writing, so I could tell what's supposed to be good about her. I've been aware of her for a few years but never thought about her. I saw a reproduction in an old art magazine a while ago of a work of hers that

sold at auction for an amazingly high amount. I started reading the gallery press release but it was too airy and grand, and I didn't want to go on with it. I looked at a book on the gallery desk, published in Switzerland or Germany or somewhere. Page after page of her work: the colour always good, the subjects of the containers for the colour, or the image-events on which to hang colours, disappointing. The paintings would have been illustrational but they were destroying their own illustrational nature by not trying as hard as "illustrational" suggests.

I didn't want to read anything about her after all. I just had random associations. I saw a show by her in New York once, with a painting of monkeys up a tree. At the time I thought, "It's impossible to look at this." She's actually quite old, and she's obviously experienced. It's hard to get colour to be so sophisticated if you haven't been doing it for a long time.

I had to go back to the vase of flowers picture because it was a bit compelling. There were many carefully prepared-for but at the same time vigorous and nice small open brush strokes. I began to feel that the subject matter wasn't entirely ironic, and I although I couldn't care less about it, it wasn't so obvious that she couldn't either. There was something deliberate about it for her. I couldn't say the imagery was just for collectors, or to have something to do, or to feebly acknowledge some theory idea about imagery – to put what you'd like to do anyway, your daily dabbing and splashing, in a meaning bracket that has some authority at the moment. Whatever it might be – I didn't know yet.

In the book were Bayeux Tapestry Normans on horseback, lesbians by Toulouse Lautrec, lots of schematic nature. Not lesbians as such, but a page from an art book. Not really the Bayeux Tapestry but a painting of an illustration of it. Not nature as such, etc. Definitely a theme of the joke-feminine, that look of feeble charm that the imagery has, wanting to be lovely and pleasing with a delightful flowery colour sense and pictures of fantasy harmless animals.

I imagined someone might write something about her and femininity. Femininity, or reclaiming femininity, might very well be the basis of her work, since she goes in for flowers, mothers and mysticism. Women stitched the Bayeux Tapestry. Maybe the clock in this show was the life cycle and the wave menstrual. Mythical beasts are "spiritual," and women are often the bearers of spiritual values, the bearers of mystical information down to children.

Everything in the show had an easy graphic unity. Maybe it wasn't so easy to do. Maybe she has special masking techniques to achieve a look of effortlessness. Matisse is not completely removed from this discussion. He's hovering nearby. We think of him as light and fresh. It's hard to make colour work like she does, to unify different surfaces, to keep a layout so right-looking, the placing so calm and right. The flower painting was allowed to fall apart a bit more. I thought she usually does easy colour oppositions, but here she was doing colours in threes, not an easy dualism but a hard three-ism. I didn't care what anything was: if a blob was a flower or whatever. I saw circles, emptiness, lines, and a lot of dabs rhythmically relating. I looked through the imagery to the abstract values, which I now felt were genuinely serious. She seems to have always been a success with the art market. The works she first got noticed for were joke colour field paintings. I think she was bred by one of the LA art schools. I liked this show.

Matthew Collings

Laura Owens

Until 10 January 2009

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