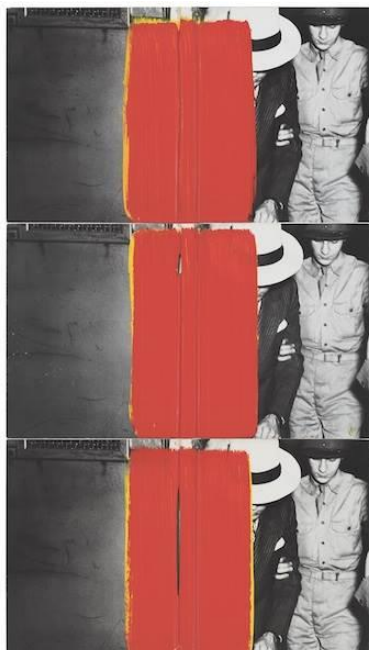


ART ALMANAC

Derek O'Connor: At Home He's A Tourist

29 November 2017 | Oscar Capezio

There is an imposing force evident in the artworks of Derek O'Connor. It arrives at speed and in vivid colour to arrest your attention. With vital alarm, his painterly events compel the eye to action, immediately establishing a visceral relation between the artist and the viewer. Face to face with the work, I am unsettled, yet powerfully aware of my physical presence as a witness to the ritual activity of painting, its craft and surface. Opaque, worked and refusing to absorb me, I sense it commanding a different mode of social action.



Derek O'Connor, *Elevator*, 2017, oil on book covers, 87 x 49cm. Courtesy the artist and Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Australian Capital Territory

'At Home He's A Tourist' at Canberra Contemporary Art Space presents paintings executed on the unbound covers of hard-backed 'Time Life' history books, experiments from a recent Megalo Print Studio residency, and a few earlier, never exhibited counterpoints to these works. Due to the hand-held association of the book covers, the scale of the work is intimate compared to the immense 'catastrophic landscape' paintings he created a decade ago, which were unique in their chromatic expression of a world accelerating toward meltdown. For instance, *Melt* (2006) and *Iced* (2006) were full-on displays of painterly gesture, whereas the more recent are less rhetorical, more subtractive in their method. Upon each book cover are fragments of imagery, both illustrated and redacted, archived, asserted and erased all at once. Having established photographic images and films as source material for the earlier landscapes, we recognise documentary media being summoned as energetic models for these new works.

O'Connor's intermedia strategy and the exhibition title were born of a 'post-punk' disdain for the industry of (material) culture, and the increased professionalisation of art, which he experienced in the 1980s. In part a feverish and noisy reaction to the clinical cool of late conceptual art of the 1970s, and an altogether assault on the inhibiting conformity of 'Taste' within the Australian art world, this new-wave of expression and doubt marked the beginnings of the tangled and splintered transition from modern to contemporary art. Within this transitional moment, it was common for painters to deploy the materials and techniques of image-production to interrogate the whole historical 'failure', and eventual calamitous nadir of early modernist ideology. Amidst this riotous spectacle, O'Connor sought-out a suitable aesthetic to convey the fragmented mode in which a fully

globalised, and mediatised world was beginning to manifest itself. It's one which he has realised most emphatically in the recent paintings, utilising the obsolete and serialised surface of the archival image to position his critical project within a contemporary culture ever more mediated by structures of power and violence.



Derek O'Connor, *Homefront*, 2017, oil on book covers, 29 x 23cm. Courtesy the artist and Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Australian Capital Territory

This project requires sustained intensity and patience, which O'Connor maintains in the new works by reanimating the cinematic technique of 'superimposition' – one body of material imposed with force upon another. In subjecting painting to the mechanism of photography, the artist generates from painting a document of energy and duration. Each singular volume of the book-covers contain layers of repeated action and reaction, a collection of compounded intensities from different visual registers, each holding its physicality and its edge to slip, and be separated by spaces of deep-thought and duration. O'Connor's chronology of petrified surface gestures therefore runs in parallel to the photographic instant, to the extent that they are revealed as simultaneously incommensurable events of the past and immediate assertions of physicality.



Derek O'Connor, *Hapless*, 2017, 29 x 23cm. Courtesy the artist and Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Australian Capital Territory

The cumulative effect of viewing these compositions is the formation of a complex and heterogeneous, interconnected knot of abstracted narratives. And so I interpret O'Connor's latest presentation of different pictorial models of expression, criss-crossing in our perception, as a visual allegory for the way we attempt to navigate the waves of data and media images, both internally and on the performative face of the wave, and of the world itself. This is the 'real' work of abstraction: apprehending that thing beyond immediate recognition, accommodating the threat it poses to the subject, whilst simultaneously responding to it in a way that retains the possibilities opened up by that moment of difference. This alienating affect reveals the motivation of O'Connor's painterly performance: a pre-emptive enactment against recognition, a refusal to be subjected to comparison and reason, suspending any definable difference between the past and the present, proximity and distance, and all that is excluded and included, real and abstracted.

O'Connor's new body of paintings are not an 'expression' of his will, rather they represent an internalised and considered aesthetic response to the structures of knowledge which he beholds in the world. The paintings don't necessarily evoke the violence of history or forgetting, nor act as remedies to alleviate this or that crisis, rather they exist now as performative events in your vision, always seen at a remove, reanimated – as if witnessing a disaster on the news, in a mass-circulated bubble, mediated in beautifully vibrant colour and motion.

By Oscar Capezio 2017