

## Whose Culture is it anyway?

Ruskin did his best to keep us at home, he didn't want the masses jumping on trains and treading along his beloved Lakeland Crags. What would he have made of those first continental holidays? Coaches of workers returning with their painted cow horns from Switzerland, miniature bulls from Spain and glass ashtrays from the museum called Italy? Culture mattered to Ruskin. Apparently he stepped into Turner's studio after his death and systematically destroyed hundreds of erotic drawings. It is said he did this rather than allow the find to sully the artist's character with a reputation for the passions that belong to that uncultured Dionysian animal that is human.

At Waygood Gallery, poet Ally May had his work in two rooms adjoining the main gallery, as vinyl lettering on walls, in an artist's book and on audio tape. Ally May is also a care-worker with the old and infirm. His poetry is about human feelings at the domestic level: everyday, banal events that are visually magical. He sees the flight of dust in a shaft of sunlight or the colour of the tarmac in the autumn evening time. He also is interested in those emotional and human feelings that can only be expressed through a translation into abstract emotional language and that mess of emotional memory that is colour.

It is a poetry that acknowledges the quiet prize of a life that is at home with itself. These short haiku question the notion of the status quo by questioning the nature of ambition. When a lifetime's aspirations of a huge section of the population rest on the fortunes of their football team, an interesting Zen style of wit takes root and is nurtured within a culture. This brand of wit is Ally May's. It is concerned with the absurdity and intensity of one's own small ambitions within a universe of stars.

Greenberg wanted us to lose ourselves in the monumental, formal completeness of an art that only referenced itself. This was an art that did not attempt to figure the sentimental or common emotions of the banal. He began his ministry at first with Abstract Expressionism and later, with increasing dogma, Colour Field painting.

*Colour-blind* by Stephen Palmer was shown in the spacious upstairs gallery. This was an interesting site in relation to the work: a large double screen video projection. On one screen the wind blew gently against a plastic, multicoloured doorway blind. It was reminiscent of the sixties: domestic Britain coming out of that brown wartime fog, the gay plastic signalled a doorway to exotic holidays and kitsch souvenirs. Simultaneously, this work by Palmer offered the pure beauty of a hard edge abstract painting of that period, creating a smart and funky barrier to so much kitsch painting.

The second screen featured a loop from the film *American Psycho*. Palmer says, "Originally I thought of putting these two things together because of what I saw as painterly references, the blind to a kind of systematic abstraction, the scene from *American Psycho* as a reference to more angst ridden expressionist abstraction.

'The room in the film bears the graffitied text 'Die Yuppie Scum' and is strewn with blood, body parts and garbage. This lair belongs to Patrick Bateman – the psycho referred to by the film's title – and is shown for only the length of the loop in my work, around four seconds. The rest of the time Bateman's apartments are portrayed as slick, sanitized spaces.'

I wonder about the gatekeepers of our thinking, emotional life called culture. When my brother returned from his 1965 European tour by bike he had every kind of souvenir imaginable bulging from his knapsack, only missing was his bike, stolen in Amsterdam strangely. These wondrous ornaments became a part of the bizarre domestic museum of the home. They, along with the Chianti wine bottles made into lamps and candlesticks, cuckoo clocks, ornamental pipes, are part of the exotica that began to orientate the British working class towards shapes that were not wartime functional and a colour palette that operated beyond brown or grey. In the summer the British began to live a continental fantasy; they hung up their plastic Venetian door curtains to keep out the flies and signal that it was holiday time. We had entered new times.

The sixties was not so much a drug culture opened by Huxley's doors of perception but rather a time when we could compare other possible existences. Go to college and get a grant, drop out, live on the dole, get a job, go on strike, hitchhike, go to India, go to Spain, go be a pop star or a painter. We began to compare perceptions: old to young, man to woman, black to white, communist to capitalist; we began to consider the royal budget in the light of Marxist ideas. Our education came fast and furious.

Stephen Palmer is interested in the detritus that signals the complexity of cultural assumptions and perceptions. His modernist painting sways in the breeze, opening up, letting in, a doorway for the kitsch that Greenberg was so keen to bar within his utopian dream; a doorway opening to the delight and danger of feeling human.

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