

INTERVIEW WITH DAN REES

BY SIMONE CIGLIA

Dan Rees

Attachment

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Simone Ciglia: This is your fifth exhibition with T293 gallery and I would like to ask you about the title that you chose for it, which is 'Attachment'. It is a psychologically very charged word, the main reference is the theory of attachment, which was developed by Bowlby - who was a psychologist and psychiatrist - in the late 60s, and I would like to know how this idea of attachment is connected to your work and why you chose this title.

Dan Rees: You are right, there is a depth to it but it also has this very simple superficial meaning, like attachment of information within an email. The Attachment theory you are speaking about, I believe is in relation to the idea of difficulties in forming attachments. I think it can be read both ways, being overly attached to something or someone and having difficulty in forming human relationships. For the show's title I had an image in my mind of Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*, it such an intensely powerful book, this damaging love story. Heathcliff is missing Catherine so much that he starts digging up her corpse because he wants to embrace her dead body and when he reaches the coffin he has this realisation that her spirit is in the world, not inside the coffin, not in this material object. I found it interesting to think about that in relation to artworks. It is somehow the reverse, because in making work you attempt to maintain the spirit within the object so that it doesn't get drained through normal everyday interaction, this is why we create these autonomous white spaces from which to view art. This is why there is a metaphysical peculiarity about the art object, if you were to extrapolate out from that and ask what that is? It is something to do with spirit.

It is difficult in the day-to-day life to perceive that. We may feel it at a deep level but it is hard because we live in a material world, so we have to constantly flip in and out of these things. 'Attachment', spoke to me because the Artex series came from my Grandmother's flat in Wales and a lot of that project is about my relationship to her. If you want to think about how objects have spirits than you only have to think about how sentimentality plays into something. When we have people we deeply care about, that care, love and affection seems to be absorbed into their objects, so the chair that she would sit on, under the artex ceilings, that takes on her spirit, for me that is interesting because you are trying to reconnect to something, and the idea that consciousness is not just in physical realm, it extends beyond the body. In the show I have a drawing of Heathcliff hugging Catherine's bones, which never actually happened in the book; it is an image that Emily Brontë indirectly provided.

SC: I would like to ask you another thing, in this exhibition you are showing among other works also some new works of the Artex series, there is a shift because you started the series seven years ago and these new paintings that you are showing now are going in a more decisive direction towards monochrome which is related to the original pattern of the Artex. There is also more focus on the installation of the works because you are showing these paintings with lamps, which are on the floor and are projecting some kind of colour on these paintings. I wanted to ask you how this series, which is now very long and maybe is your most known work, is evolving and what are the reasons of this kind of shift.

DR: The whole premise of the show is the attempt think underneath the Artex works because they have entered in the art system and in a way that has been very interesting but it has been difficult as well. The way this new series differs from the previous is that the previous works are very much individual objects and their conceptual end point was written into the beginning of how I made them, I used very seductive and kitschy colours. I had a very strong image from the making of the very first one, of it hanging in a Malibu home. I didn't know if it would actually play out like that of course. They had a seductive quality but it was inherent within their conceptual framing. Often conceptual works and emotionally orientated works get played out as opposites. So I see the colour paintings as 'disguised' conceptual works because they played to people's emotional response. The end point was that they were self-aware of where of they were trying to get to. That's is how they completed their conceptual loop. They have gone from a working class Welsh ceilings, this often maligned social environment, to being installed on walls of very wealthy people's homes in America. For me that movement, that journey meant something conceptually. There is a kind of woundedness within that, a journey of spirited of objects, maybe they were drained of meaning and regained meaning.

If the colourful works are more vocabulary based, these new works are looking more at the grammar underneath, of what was my actual emotional connection to them, why I even subconsciously made them in the first place. I kept thinking of Catherine's skeleton and the whiteness of the bones, going back to the bones, digging down into them and then the emergence of the colour. The colours are just emerging, so it is taking the project backwards, a bit like these films that do an origin story, to tell where it all started.

SC: You mentioned an element that I think it very important to your practice, which is the conceptual aspect. I wanted to ask you how is your relationship with the classical Conceptual art of the 60s and 70s, how do you relate to that, how do you try to get terms with that?

DR: An attitude, I think and it shouldn't be aesthetic because that's socially and historically based. That's what I always found weird, that conceptual art has an aesthetic because all art is conceptual if it is self-aware, it doesn't matter what the medium is. Art historically has become self-aware maybe with Duchamp, with the idea that art could be an idea, although people figured that out prior, and then you have what the Conceptual artists of few generations later added on to that. Again, it is the grammar of that that I find interesting, not the topographic aspect of it, because that's all dependent on very specific time and place elements, it's the underlining aspect. There is zero reason why abstract paintings couldn't fall into that. That's why I went down that route because it seemed like the diametrically opposed thing to do. I was interested in abstract painting because it occupied the lower rungs of the intellectual art hierarchy.

As soon as you use painting it becomes so loaded and you have to constantly think about being misunderstood; you have to insist on being conceptual, but I think you have to consider being misunderstood as part of the journey in the sense that the Artex painting hanging in a collectors' home is part of the conceptual journey. That's all about being self-aware as an artist. I think we are at a point now where no media has any specific legitimacy over anything else. What makes work legitimate is that it understands its place within the contemporary. That is the conceptual legacy that goes all the way back to the Jena Romantics.

SC: And then there is another thread which is running throughout all your work, which I think is quite interesting and also peculiar which is this reference to Wales to your country of origin, because you have been living in Germany for many years now but you are constantly going back to Wales, investigating some kind of personal history, with the Artex paintings, or historical episodes such as the solidarity campaign between workers of Wales and Nicaragua, I would like to know why there is very strong presence of your country in your work?

DR: Wales is a very specific country; it is very unique because it is almost primarily working class. It doesn't have an aristocracy, it barely has a middle class, and it was almost the working class attachment to England. The role of culture becomes deeply important as a tool for people to educate themselves. There is another aspect, which is when I was in Berlin and I would go to visit my grandmother in Wales. That's why I've got the lamps in this show, because there is a familiarity within them that was important. There is a comfort with these things that are ugly and Artex ceilings are ugly and kitsch. It was connecting me to something that I needed, that maybe I was not getting in my environment in Berlin. That is partially why I would go back so often. I would sometimes show my work to my Grandmother, maybe an Artex painting and she always wanted to see an image in it. There is humour in the idea of trying to explain abstract art to her, a humour and intrigue.

SC: For this exhibition you wrote a text, which is not really a press release, but it is somehow accompanying the exhibition. In this text you mention some theoretical references like you mentioned the Romantics for example, but also the critical theory of Adorno, etc. I wanted to explore more this theoretical base of your work.

DR: The text is a work, it informs the work but it is trying to be more than a press text. I mentioned the Romantics and the reasons they are important because I think it relates to the Artex since it is a pattern, a continuous pattern. The reason it was compelling to me as a teenager, staring up at night, was this continuous overlaying pattern. Every painting is a instantiation of this pattern; each painting in the show is different in size by ten centimetres, so it has got a seriality to it. What I thought was interesting in the Romantics is that they were continuing on from Kant - going against his idea of beauty - and they came up with the form of the fragment and how that relates to the absolute, which is a fundamental relationship and it goes against Platonic idealism. In Romanticism the absolute is the summation of the parts, it's a lot more related to how human's interact with each other, when another person walks into the room it changes the conscious environment of that room.

One painting, that you make, changes the formation of the series. For me this is interesting because you mentioned the social aspect in Wales, and for me Romanticism and the idea of fragments provides a metaphysical underpinning to Socialist ideas. We are the manifestation of consciousness in a particularised form and consciousness, in a broader sense, is manifested in in everything in the world. We are consciousness that becomes conscious of itself. That relates to Adorno in the sense that the art object is this thing that contains a 'subject' and 'object' in the moment that it becomes 'self-aware' and autonomous. Then there is capitalism and all the relations that play out from that. The idea is that the art object is this thing that contains a negation, from which you understand yourself as alienated. I have interest in politics but I see it as the tip of the iceberg, I feel you need this metaphysical understanding in order to make sense out of that.