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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
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Private Lives

Neal Tait



These paintings feel furtive. They often depict blank-faced people who are laid open less through description than through gesture, their faces rubbed out or revealed in odd concentrations of detail: a sick lip, a feverish eye, a delicate nose, a vacant stare.

This is not as bleak as it sounds. Peculiar still lifes - a CD floating in space like an airborne egg, a clumsy figurine of a horse, a nature morte of a skull that looks like a potato - compete with abstractions that hover at the edge of your consciousness like something vaguely remembered. Gaze long enough and shapes emerge from these abstractions in the way they do from clouds. Tiers in an opera house float gradually from tentative lines; metal girders hurtle from a hot-pink sky; a yellow blob echoes a golden spoon.

Tait is preoccupied with damage - amputees, illness, bandages and forlorn, often rickety limbs litter his pictures like the aftermath of an unnamed accident. These appendages, many of which combine a kind of clumsy elegance, recall the stilted approximation of marionettes; they are also reminiscent of hyperreal prosthetics. Despite their implication of injury, many of these strange scenarios are often surprisingly lovely, but it's a beauty you could never trust and which could never trust itself (the surfaces are too unstable). Scenes are rendered with syncopated, often chalky paint, seemingly mixed with tears and rain. At every corner lurk unverifiable but potent clues of oblique mysteries. (A stretched back? A crippled dog? A porcelain figure with a wet mouth?) The pictures are difficult to predict; get used to one, and the next will change your mind. This is despite the fact that Tait works hard to reveal his process - turning you back on yourself, emphasizing the fact that the only trickery in art is your own expectation of it. Sometimes paint is scraped away to reveal underlying structures that contradict what lies above - insubstantial supports for weighty images, or vice versa. From time to time surprisingly tough, even bright, layers of colour emerge from a foggy palette; the resultant shifts in tone, mood or surface are described with a meticulous sensitivity. In some pictures colour appears to have been slapped down with almost indecent haste. Elsewhere, sinister combinations - acid greens and sick ochres, drab browns and greys - whisper the presence of something vaguely malevolent, but it's a malevolence that feels as if it were caused less by intention than by accident. (Some of Tait's pictures give me the feeling I had when I once saw a sunset made particularly vivid by an erupting volcano that had destroyed many lives - an uneasy delight tempered by guilt.)

Tait's source material is vague: it might equally be a photograph in a newspaper or magazine, or something in his studio that once caught his eye (a book, a lamp, a face, an animal ...) - the result of a conscious reverie or a doodle. This responsiveness to the random surfaces of the world makes a strange kind of sense. Tait paints in the way we dream, when peripheral objects and meanings collide with a reasoning that holds your attention even as you dismiss its logic. *Untitled* (2000), for example, is a painting of various coloured balls attached to a stick in a mountainous landscape. It was inspired by a visit to Arezzo to see the Piero della Francesca. The church, however, was closed and so Tait went for a walk, during the course of which he came across a man selling coloured footballs. (This is painting mimicking life: every day we set out to see something and yet we always see something else.)

Tait's drawings look more tentative and introspective than the paintings, as if the artist was feeling his way through the dark, using diagrams to lay bare the light. Awkward lines wander across the page and stop unexpectedly, unsure of their way. Unhealthy tones sucked of light and life somehow bloom next to strident blocks of high-keyed colour; rugged descriptions of recognizable objects hover in unabashedly abstract fields - exposing the anxiety and decision-making involved in the creation of pictures. In the paintings this atmosphere of exploration is more concrete and less tentative as a certain sophistication of design and composition has crept in. Yet the sense of something contradictory or even indescribable is never far away - like a damp lowland mist, mixed with flashes of hot sun, or the inside of rarely opened cupboard enveloping an old newspaper.



In the painting *Olivia* (2001-2), for example, a woman, her pale face only vaguely delineated in white tonal shifts, offers up a three-quarter profile, hand on hip, the curve of her spine implying the casual self-consciousness of a professional model. The image was originally inspired by a fashion photograph from the 1970s, but the pose echoes a 1920s insouciance. Although she appears relaxed, indifferent even, it gradually becomes apparent that she is not alone but is being embraced by a spectral figure. An ethereal purple-grey arm, as delicate as a bruise, languishes comfortably beneath her own hand; the faint body to which it is attached is partially hidden, drifting like a memory over the cool, living flesh. You never, of course, find out what has happened, or is about to happen - this is an interrupted conversation of a painting in the same way that life is so often a series of thoughts or actions stopped before their completion or conclusion. The fact that Tait has frozen a scene from a complex story to which we have no access implies, of course, that the point of the painting (perhaps all painting) is its lack of, not its need for, resolution. This is how things are.

Tait's approach is as much about the physicality of paint as about the meaning of painting. He has commented that 'ideal painting is continually open'. The struggle to achieve such openness is perhaps the single constant factor in his pictures. Other worlds and dimensions beyond the picture plane are indicated in the evasive glances of the people he paints (very few of these subjects are willing to look you in the eye), and the paintings' parameters are loose to an extreme degree - many of these pictures appear not so much finished as abandoned. Yet the atmosphere of almost soporific unease that fills them also hints at a serene self-sufficiency; as if looking at an image should demand nothing more from the viewer than a pair of eyes and an acceptance of the infinite variables of the imagination.

I have always wondered if, when you die, you can come back and haunt yourself. It's a ridiculous thought - like childhood speculation about whether a snake can eat itself, starting with its tail. But the fact is, your mind can accommodate an infinite range of impossible scenarios; this is perhaps what makes life endurable. Ideas generate ideas and marks spawn marks, yet logic in many pictures is often an option just out of reach. This should not be surprising, but sometimes you are reminded that it still is.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

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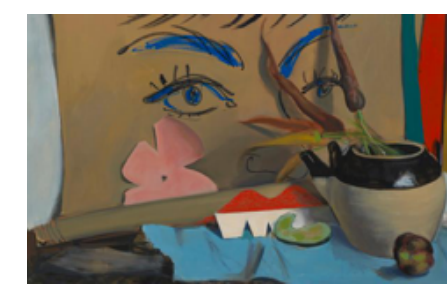
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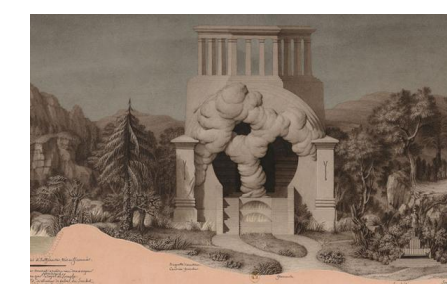
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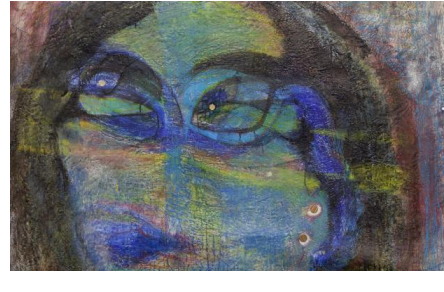
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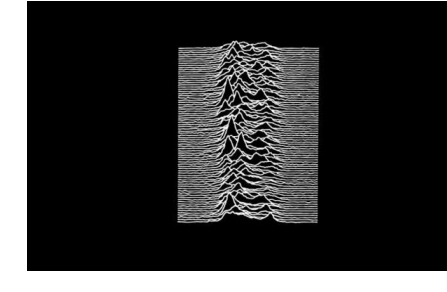
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