



Features /

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
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Night for Day

Dirk Bell



In Dirk Bell's paintings and drawings, night's dissolution is privileged over the dull clarity of day. Confused mythologies, sleep and, by association, dreaming are evoked by the soporific delicacy of his pencil, in tired layers of paint and in allusions to the ambiguous elation of altered states.

Despite these Romantic preoccupations, however, the artist approaches the visual non sequitur with the energy of a snapshot. A delicate drawing might be shown alongside found paintings he has crudely reworked, or photographs preoccupied with an airy take on dislocation. His approach can be claustrophobic, even deathly; abstracted with self-absorption or erupting without warning into a sensuality that crackles with hallucinogenic high spirits. Yet despite his indebtedness to fin-de-siècle Symbolism (his pictures appear haunted by Odilon Redon and Jean Delville, in particular), Bell's unabashed lyricism - concerned with rapidly shifting contexts, disintegration and visual saturation - is as 21st-century as channel-surfing.

To mark the occasion of his solo show, BQ gallery in Cologne recently published Bell's *Volume One* (2003), a small, unbound picture book. The images reproduced include a drawing of a shadowy bunch of flowers; a photograph of an unrecognizable swath of flesh; the soft, filtered light of a messy bedroom; a hand emerging from gloom holding a flame; and a photograph of children gazing at a stain on the footpath. The pages are loose and non-hierarchical - without any overt logic, seemingly unconnected pictures can be shuffled and rearranged to create fresh associations. Aside from Bell's occasional infatuation with the abstract possibilities of the physical world, his approach is resolutely figurative. Yet although narratives are implied, conclusions are not. Apart from the title on the cover, the only words to be found in *Volume One* appear in a photograph of a girl who is eating an apple: she wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the inscription 'insanity is not a defence'. Words, Bell seems to suggest, are something from which it is occasionally necessary to retreat. The surfaces and patterns of the world - the ones the artist either creates or observes - speak volumes. In this sense his pictures feel like a celebration of sensuality over reason.

Despite an occasional mood of disordered alienation, Bell's pictures reveal an unapologetic affection for sentimental imagery combined with a lush immersion in the mystical. The artist is enamoured, in equal measure, with swans, ghosts, trees, Arab horses, kisses, guitars, flowers, spooky trees and the moon emerging from behind clouds; with ethereal beings with heavy eyelids and softly parted lips; and with eggs and nipples. His paint application is thin and diluted, his palette spectral and sombre - Bell is fond of washes of deep purples, grubby blacks, shadowy blues, veiled whites, watery greens and violets. His pencil marks can be subtle to the point of near-invisibility. It's impossible to look at such images and remain immune to their exhausted provenance, to the devalued, even lost, meanings of their origins - knowledge is adrift here in the detritus of its own making. As a result, what is evoked is a nostalgia dragged restlessly into the ruins of the present. Elements intertwine with a kind of visual telepathy and temporal slipperiness, each picture highly attuned to, and reacting to, another. The resulting impression is moody and often decadent. Like a vision of the past thought up in the future, humans in Bell's pictures are more immaterial than the gauzy material that floats across their skin. Such imagery, laughed at by Modernism and trivialized by hippies, can come very close to being corny, but here it's not. Unashamed, uncynical anachronisms spring revitalized from Bell's imagination with a curious energy, zoning in on the incoherence and cliché that often co-exist with - and even fuel - originality.

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In its heyday Symbolism was less a coherent movement than a state of mind, or many minds. In this respect Bell, in his struggle to give feeling a form, is a natural. In his hands an image of light is not necessarily about light, so much as the recreation of the mute emotion that light might evoke - like the dissolving intimacy that happens when you kiss someone and the details of their face are lost in the abstraction of the close-up. However, the symbols Bell uses, notwithstanding their evocation of very real moods, indicate a reality that can only be accessed via the imagination; like immaterial beings with carnal desires, the reality they crave is eternally elusive. (Swans do not often morph into androgynous beings.) This would account for the sense of yearning that permeates much of this work. What Bell describes does not, aside from the physicality he has lent the idea, exist as a concrete possibility.

In spite of the eclecticism of his approach, Bell seems less interested in difference than in the melting of boundaries - of gender, time or the imagination. Unlike the Symbolist painters, some of whom described the relationship between the sexes as one fuelled by unease, Bell often depicts men and women dissolving into each other, a seemingly blissful state resulting in something akin to emotional and physical androgyny - a romantic possibility of sexual equivalence. In his reworking of found paintings, the dissolve takes on new meaning: in one faded picture of a woman playing guitar, for example, Bell has simply added a chalk drawing of a skeletal ghost entwining her like clumsy ectoplasm - an image from the past that, like all images from the past, can't help but infect the ones made now.

In Bell's work figures and marks are recycled, layered, rubbed out and altered. (Perhaps all art is a variation on the idea of a remnant.) The idea of the 'swan-song' is appropriate here (especially considering the ubiquity of swans in Bell's oeuvre): a song fabled to be by a dying swan, a final farewell or performance. But of course, no swan-song is the last one; it's an endlessly repeated lament, manifested in various ways, for each death. Like art embodying the transformation of a thought or an instinct into a material, so too a song by a bird can imply both the death and, by implication, the rebirth, of possibility. (When Apollo was born at Delos, the event was celebrated by flights of circling swans.) In Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake* (1876-7) the dying swan is bought back to life with a kiss - a transformation Bell surely understands.

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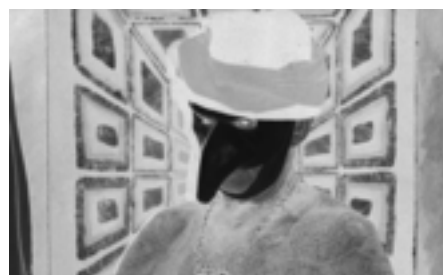
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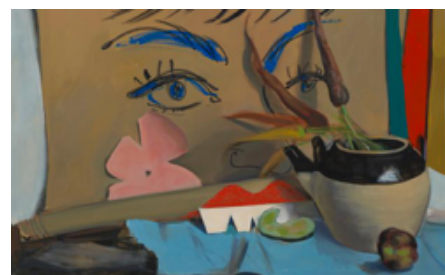
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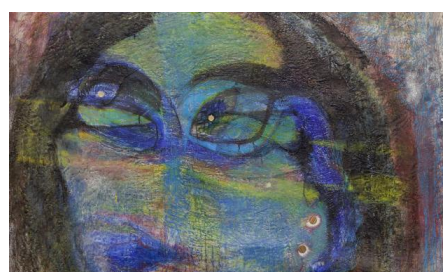
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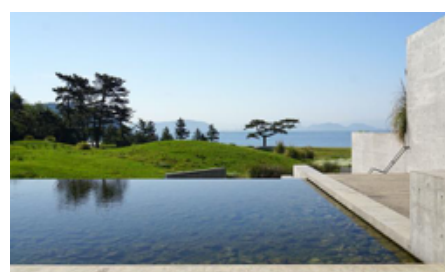
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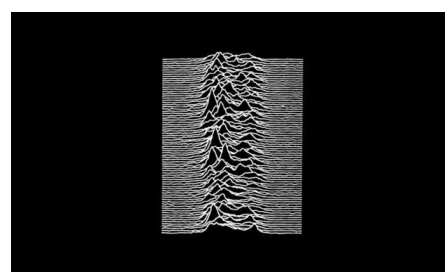
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