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Featuring
David Austen: Surfacing at the crossroads
by Martin Westwood

Issue 5

DAVID AUSTEN: SURFACING AT THE CROSSROADS BY MARTIN WESTWOOD

At a crossroad there are eyes painted on eyelids while a vision of immobility is dreamed. And these blind eyes that do not blink, more real, as they are, than the dreamt vision, mock the lucidity of the dream. And in the lucidity of the dream, the facticity of the sleeping and still figure is caricatured into a transfixed, petrified body. The dead hand of representation bedfellows the breathing form, Whilst paralysis partners intelligible vision.

“...one...” Searching for a book amongst the shelves of unordered novels, biographies, drama classics and catalogues, a mode of scanning, certainly not reading, occurs. An image is formed in the mind of the size, shape, dimension, ageing and font upon the sought after book’s spine. The vague image allows the retrieval of the book quicker than reading all of the titles.

“...two...” This mode of scanning allows the book’s design to take on a particular model of significance. It’s font brings to mind a certain publishing

house and with that a particular era and possibly the rarity of the book. It may be a reprint and so it may bring to mind economic and cultural reasons why it appeared relevant to be republished then and there. Book covers tell us much about books, how they are cloaked in the garb of a particular time.

“...three...” This book spine stands upright. It has the appearance of an annual. It is black and white, belying the jollity of comic annuals familiar from childhood. At the base of this spine is the photographic image of the shine of the vamp of a shoe; to the middle a cropped hand clasps a cropped pint glass of stout. Below the spine’s centre a forthright and familiar upper-case font reads DAVID AUSTEN, and below, almost in a default font, Milton Keynes Gallery.

“...four...” The photograph on the cover of this book shows a portrait of ten men. They wear identical white opera hats. These men, who may never visit the opera, stand before redbrick walling; to the upper right there is the regular pattern of tiling in a tone recognisable as the deep red, green or brown of once common British pub exteriors. Placed on the ground to the right of these men are wooden crates, full with bottles of beer. Each of the men stands with the contents of one of these bottles poured into the pint glass each one clutches. On top of these crates are several, possibly spare, hats; identical to the ones the men wear. A pantomime of endless performers.

“...five...” Along with the hats, each of the men sports on his left lapel what appears to be a white carnation. A special day then. A beano? An out of the ordinary day, a day of celebration, a day of wearing one’s best suit and of drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. It appears, given

Top: **Still from Crackers**, 2007

Courtesy of the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery

Bottom: **David Austen's studio with Paris Hotel**, 2008

Courtesy of the artist



the carnations and white celebratory hats, with their dandyish bands, to be a wedding day with only one factor missing, the absence of any women, and one woman in particular, the bride, who's special day it may indeed be. Instead we have the image of male bonding on a day of marital (certainly heterosexual) union with women excluded from the scene. A day in which love and the law

unite to bring at least one man and woman together in their community is overshadowed by the possible arrogance of fraternity and the exclusions built into working-class gender roles, the public house and a culture of drinking and escapism. Escapism from the constraints of domesticity and marriage through men being with men? Where is she? And who amongst this camaraderie of drinkers,

these self-deluders with their wannabe hats, would be the bridegroom? No one steps forward as the lead actor here. A never-ending series of bachelor boys?

What happens inside the pub? What happens upstairs in the bedrooms of the pub and the neighboring houses. Where the borrowed, secondhand aspirations and glamour of these opera hats meets a fumble in the dark. Where who you want to be and who you are may lie in unhappy union. Where desire and love are negotiated bedfellows.

"Strip her...put fingers into her. Inside her." (1)

Whose love and whose law? Maybe they have wandered off after the wedding, away from a love for the law and the laws of love, to be together as men, separated from the obligations of family and work. To drink, smoke; wear hats they never usually wear. Hats worn by men in films. To escape, celebrate and solidify, through their performances together, their masculinity. Emotional vulnerabilities can be concealed and tenderness could be a dream glimpsed through the role-playing of a life of rented opera hats.

"Should've kept her locked up," (2) one of them thinks

Pubs and men. The image of violence or at least the threat is never too far away.

"She made you feel funny and good looking like you were an actor in a film..." (3)

Bonhomie can always shift under the influence. Ambivalent, unpredictable emotional reactions. Affection and love. Affection and condescension.

Tenderness and aggression.

"...six..." "They used to call it the Continent", someone said after several pints, "then it was Europe, then it was the EEC and now it's the fucking European Union." Or maybe I said it, or David Austen said it, or the ghost

of Joseph Cornell (though it's hard to imagine him swearing).

Either way, this may be the continent. Full of naivety and bigotry and glamour and promise and mobility. And innocent pleasures. And you could smoke there. Decadence, optimism, unadministered (at least relatively) social life. And that hotel in Paris called Paris Hotel, what else would you call it. Except this hotel wasn't in Paris. Even the owner hadn't ever been to Paris, at least not Continental Paris.

Joseph Cornell rarely left Flushing, Queens in New York yet would hold conversations about the waiters in Parisian restaurants built from information read in tour guides of that city. Vicarious living is full of promise. 'Casablanca' came to mind but that makes no sense.

A swan song?

"...seven..." Two men sit in a room. Between them hangs a group of spheres, arranged one above the other in a vertical descension. The spheres of this bulbous mobile resemble lugubrious leadshot on a fishing line placed in water without a current.

The head bobs up and then down. Once descended the numbers continue, weaving themselves between ascension and descension.

"...eight..." There is a studied pace and calm to this counting. The head breaks the water and breathes deeply, quickly. The arm raises above the shrinking hole, head turns, and then submerges, the eyes are closed, and sound all but disappears. Only the pressure of water against one's own head can be heard alongside a voice inside pacing out...nine....

"...ten..." Counting strokes and/or breaths in continuous rhythm. Counting and descending below the rippled surface are woven together.

The counting occurs underwater, in the dark, in silence. It is studied, disciplined, regular and paced. In the dark. In the bedroom again where there was the regular breathing of sleep, submerged, and, a woman's voice said, "do you want to fuck me"?⁽⁴⁾ Either breathing, sheep counting or sleepwalking interrupted, by her voice without timbre.

"...eleven..." A series of drawings that is a series of lines. The brush is dipped in black Kremer ink, the eye has followed the brush to the pot, the eyes shift to their left to the paper and the brush follows, a slow black line is drawn away from the body, bottom to top, echoing the vertical of the paper.

"...twelve..." the eyes raise to the pot and the hand follows, the brush dips, the eyes shift to the left, brush follows, a black line to the right and parallel to the last

"...thirteen..." eyes raise, hand follows, brush dips, eyes shift, hand draws beside and parallel

"...fourteen..." eyes raise, hand follows, brush dips, eyes shift, hand draws beside and parallel

"...fifteen..." and again

"...sixteen..." and again

"...seventeen..." and

"Can you smoke in here?"⁽⁵⁾

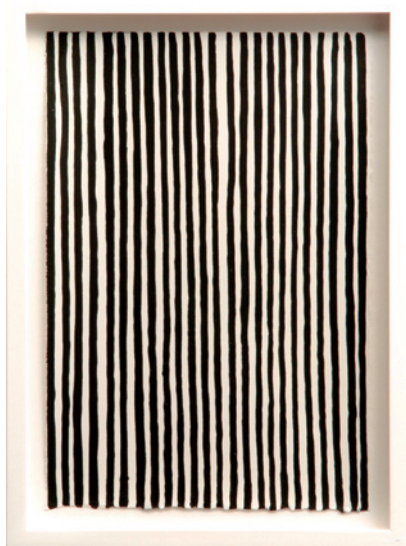
The opening line from David Austen's black-and-white film *Crackers* (2007) is uttered, after the five minute, opening shot, by the foppish wide-boy, called Tin. Tin's conversation with his sidekick called Heart moves into a competition of questionable emotions. Too staged, too showy. The artifice of theatre rubbing up against the voyeurism of cinema. Removed from the social environment they refer to, they remain in what seems a grand, dilapidated hotel

room/waiting room for the length of the film performing their rehearsed emotions of tenderness jack-knifing into aggression and violence. Jokers.

The black-and-white silent film *Man Smoking* (2008), a companion to Austen's earlier film *Smoking Moon* (2006), is, unsurprisingly, a film of a man smoking many cigarettes. The silent film format and the cuts, hitting black hard, with light leaking through the 16 mm film format, create a sense of early documentary, compounded by the 'non-contemporary' setting, of a stonemason's yard, with the static sculpture of a woman in the background. The man wears sandals and is dressed in classic 'Mediterranean' light coloured trousers and black polo-shirt.

He has an agitation about him, his attention jerks off at times, apparently distracted. A performance of personal absorption interrupted by the presence of the camera. Only the camera would do this, promise verity yet offer deceit, promise to hide its presence yet encourage, not artifice, but a performance. This is what the camera does, reflect our vicarious, deluded selves back to us.

Cigarettes. A prop in a modern performance. A reality of addiction and possible premature death. But also 'time-out', being alone in one's own pleasure of completely separated mortality. Breathe in. Breathe out. Glamour and seduction known from old films where men and women puckered their lips and sucked and blew. Inside then outside. Dreams of seductive performance through props, patterns of wispy, good-looking smoke and that decaying body. Interiority, a performance of proximity to one's own body, thoughts, one's own unproductive, wasteful activities. Where once Chardin's people played house of cards, blew soap-bubbles, sipped tea, absorbed in their own private reveries, the twentieth century everyman/woman smoked a cigarette, breathing inwards, as if to



Top: **Darkland**
2007
Ink on paper
Installation shot at Milton Keynes Gallery

Left: **Glitter**
2007
Ink on paper

Both courtesy of the artist &
Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London



Above left: **Love Calling**
2007
Oil on linen
(180 x 180 cm)

Courtesy of the artist &
Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

Above right: **Photograph of David Austen's studio**

Courtesy of the artist

announce their autonomous control, their self-absorption, then exhaling, disappearing behind a performing veil of carbon. Unashamed, old-fashioned glamour....“like you were an actor in a film”...or a sleepwalker in someone else’s dream

Austen’s work deals with the seductive fictions of Modernist film, theatre, literature and painting. His work doesn’t present us with a fake bravery, another type of ‘false consciousness’, which could be known as critique, instead Austen contains and manipulates familiarity, reworking those fictions and places already established. There is no Archimedean point sought after to lift these fictions. Instead his position is non-judgmental, nostalgic, even sentimental and openly seduced by these fictions with, what these days, is an almost old-fashioned honesty.

In a time of a possibly unprecedented quantity of fictions, vicarious living must be at a new height. Austen’s work takes pleasure in this and crosses the wires. Images and words like the smoke his man and moon inhale, disappear inwards, mixing with the porous, membranous, fragile body and then exhale offering us no maps of it’s affect in a depth we might only imagine.

The phrase goes “Do not judge a book by its cover”. All surface, all superficiality. The phrase is most apt when applied to the novel. The nineteenth century novel gave birth to interior dialogue, to the primacy of subjective representation. Not to judge a book by its cover was exactly the moral of the bourgeois novel, populated as it was by untrustworthy characters. A world inhabited with swindlers, confidence tricksters and social climbers does not have trustworthy surfaces (5). David Austen photographs the covers of modern novels discouraging us from going beneath their surface, of exploring their interiors.

Whilst David Austen’s work

articulates surfaces it does not celebrate them. There is a claustrophobic, leaden opacity too much of Austen’s manipulated surfaces. Whether this is the dryly painted, all-over, deadpan surface of the text paintings, the mobiles with their multiple coats of impenetrable paint or the lines of Kremer ink in *Glitter* (2007). Drawn with a Japanese brush, slowly, repetitively, the surfaces of this work’s 30 sheets of framed paper announce their own purchase against the brush. We are moving through a density of hidden, sublimated material. A painting has the word **BLIND** emboldened on it’s surface. Who? What? Blind? Maybe we should speak it, not see it, this oxymoronic statement. Picasso said something like “all artists should have their eyes poked out”. Here we are, **BLIND**. What we see tells us of not seeing, of it’s impossibility. These lines of Kremer ink are not the work of sight but of touch, of blindness, a line that sleepwalks it’s way across the surface, leaving us with only our eyes, to guess what it will not, cannot, illuminate.

Austen’s idea of surface seems to be something like a portal with an unfulfillable promise of suspension. Whether an oil painting of text, in font reminiscent of John Calder publications of the fifties and sixties, tabloid headlines and blunt, straightforward signage, or the photograph of a book cover, they are an invitation towards escapism, nostalgia and reverie. A cultural affection and attraction towards material that has passed into a classic modern status. Entry points of words that evoke possible title screens from a film or a title for an unwritten novel. The mind skids sideways from the surfaces of words making lateral connections to a place where cultural and personal associations have become so muddled and sublimated that they could not be disentwined. This seems to be Austen’s point in many works, that we cannot disentangle ourselves from illusions and the reworking of surfaces.

Austen’s work is littered with dualities, between performance and interiority, between illusion and facticity, between being above or below a surface, between inhaling and exhaling, between waking and dreaming, between blindness and sight. All these dualities slip and slide between each other and encourage their own cross-readings. Of course, dualities do not operate like a grayscale, the more or the less of one or another. Though we may imagine the point at which they meet, a fleeting surface we would pass through without knowing, until, too late, we had arrived on the other side. A coin only falls heads or tails and as it falls conceals it’s reverse. Austen may prioritise a term of a duality in some works though his output as a whole is more concerned to search out this elusive surface. Maybe a hope against hope that the coin may land, vertically, on it’s rim

(1), (2), (3) and (5) Dialogue from ‘Crackers’, David Austen, (2007)

(4) “Green Dream”, David Austen

(5) See “Consciousness and the Novel”, David Lodge



Dead Cat Boundary – Martin Westwood
2006
Various media
(144 x 144 x 55 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and The Approach, London



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