

FLORENCE TRUST CATALOGUE 2011

Our cities are populated with the architectural remnants of past socioeconomic systems, cultures, and values. Factories that were once filled with labouring classes are today retrofitted for the Pilates generation; homes designed for extended Victorian families are atomised into awkward little flats; and churches, such as St Saviours, are filled with artists. The Florence Trust is housed in this splendid Arts and Crafts building. But it is the ordinariness of this place as a phenomenon of urban real estate and urban re-appropriation, which gives it its prescience for contemporary art. It is just one church in a global sphere of appropriated structures, and is at once specific and part of a greater macrocosm.

Winston Churchill paraphrased a more ancient idiom when he said: "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us" (he was discussing the postwar rebuilding of Parliament). Appropriating Churchill in turn, we might ask how an artist should respond to, or ignore, a structure such as Saint Saviours? How does the tonnage of bricks and mortar bear upon the multivalent, nomadic reality of modern urban existence? The answers are everywhere in the work being made here in 2011. The current residents of the Florence Trust are incredibly well informed and engaged with issues of urbanization, appropriation, détournement, hauntology, relics, modernity and tradition. If their diverse practices are in any way unified, it is in an exploration of the idea

that cultural remainders are the material condition of contemporary life.

Justine Eagle explores contemporary urban reality through symbols whose familiarity grants them a sort of invisibility in everyday life. Often drawing on the buzz and sexual energy of youth culture, Eagle produces images that mix desire and danger: *Aioli* (2010) is a close-up image of jeans rendered in acrylic silkscreen on canvas, which references an economy of images, from post-punk album covers to AIDS campaign posters in the 1980s (his canvas focus on what he calls the "condom pocket"). These works call up a host of questions about the process of reproduction and distribution of popular images. Eagle is also deeply invested in the ageing modernity of England's New Towns, notably Milton Keynes and Telford, and the civic sculptures that dot and adorn their manifold roundabouts and windy plazas. His works look precision-engineered, are cool and quick to the pulse of this post-Fordist world.

Anna M. R. Freeman's art contrasts with Eagle's interests and methods in many ways - where his work is based on screen prints and motifs of urban culture, hers are rendered with oil on hardboard. But she too explores the built environment as one of lived experience, accrual and remainders: she paints images of junk shops and churches, dense to the point of abstraction. Rendering these images on solid, white surfaces, she uses a startling technique that emphasises the form and flow of the brush stroke. When I spoke with Freeman, she was working on a project

based on the baroque-looking Art Nouveau staircase in the Gustave Moreau museum in Paris (Moreau was a nineteenth-century French Symbolist painter), drawing from it to re-imagine the Biblical story of Jacob's Ladder - the famous stairway to heaven. Often painted and completed in just one day, Freeman's rapidly executed paintings are keyed to specific times and places. Her work is invested with a vertiginous sense that the past echoes into present sites and places.

Alan Magee explores the notion of human agency in our pre-built environment: how people may take hold of that material world and reform it to their own specifications, needs, and desires. A recent project has seen Magee working with residents in a housing estate in London, where he offered his services as an artist. Residents then asked Magee to help in diverse ways, from creating drawings for a child, to fixing a broken remote control toy. Magee also re-engineers DIY furniture from shops such as IKEA into functionless but poised and elegant sculptural works: one dramatic incarnation of his inventive sculptural imagination is given in a circular structure built from cheap wooden clothes horses. Magee's interest in wood is connected with its seemingly endless recyclability: when a wooden object's initial use is over, the fibres can be torn apart and glued back together into new implements, furnishings or art works.

Also exploring the mutable potential of urban materials, **Taisuke Makihara** seeks to activate the architectonics of space - his materials are as unconventional as cheddar

cheese slices cut to match the floor tiles of St Saviours church (a work in progress), and a forest of Zildjian-brand cymbals on elongated stands installed in a gallery in Japan (*Flooring*, 2008). Makihara's work often extends out on a horizontal plane and highlight or accentuate pre-existing structures: *Brick* (2009) was an installation in which the artist laid a layer of bricks over a section of an existing floor, echoing and repeating the extant herringbone pattern. Quietly comic suggestiveness is also a recurring theme. *Henry* (2008) is an installation of a machine used at bowling alleys to return the ball to the bowler; in the work, however, no ball is ever delivered, but the machine's whirring motor suggested a cavernous, perhaps even Gothic, underground space. The artist's humour recurs in offbeat videos such as *Blitzen* (2010), in which the artist slowly disassembles an animated and illuminated model of a reindeer.

Catrin Morgan is interested in the narrative force of deception, mythologizing, and rumour in creative practices. She revels in the false starts offered by self-aware mischief-makers, and has taken as her raw material other cultural practitioner's work. Morgan's book *Phantom Sentiments* was made in cahoots with early- to mid-career male artists whose works deal in fabulated narrative arcs: Ryan Gander, Tom McCarthy and Jamie Shovlin. Her interest in typography (she is completing her PhD in Illustration at the Royal College of Art) is evident in such innovations as a font designed to be illegible - the equivalent of an undisclosed murmur. In her complex web of influences, Morgan draws from scientific diagrams, measuring and mapping technologies.

These include a diagram of personal affinities based on the cycle of anaerobic respiration (*Our father's mistress*), and a murder mystery based on cartographic depictions of islands (*Mapping the moment at which your life will end*). Each fictional story is thus embedded in a non-fictional framework. Morgan also draws from the machinations of contemporary cryptographers: the artist has recently been looking into the strange phenomenon of government-run radio signalling stations that broadcast cryptic strings of numbers, read aloud by human or mechanised voices. Various conspiracy theories have coalesced around these places - are they secret service broadcasts communicating to spies? The adventure, of course, is in the not knowing.

Freya Pocklington is similarly interested in notions of self-contained worlds, from the state-of-nature theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to the constructed dystopia of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and music videos such as Wiley's *Rolex* (2008). The artist's Conté crayon drawings, animations and videos, present a dark bestiary in which the unexpected is the norm. As human stand-ins, Pocklington's pooches are a ragbag affair: they are underdogs, but also over-dogs, empathetic but also merciless and inhumane. Some of the dogs appear to be merrymaking, others simply idle away their time in surreal isolation - a recurring motif is the beast trapped inside a bell jar, an image that recalls ideas of archive, preservation and airless museology. There have, of course, been numerous presentations of canines in fiction as moral fables: think of Argos, the faithful lead in Homer's *Odyssey* who recognises the true hero upon

his return; Buck, the protagonist of Jack London's *Call of the Wild* (1903) who discovers his natural freedom; and Mikhail Bulgakov's dismal proletarian antihero in *Heart of a Dog* (1925). In Pocklington's art, dogs are somewhat different: they are freighted with the symbolic load of fable, but the message is left deliberately, potently, ambiguous.

Maya Ramsay's two-dimensional works explore process, materials and abstraction. The artist visits disused warehouses and other off-the-beaten-track places, where she applies layer upon layer of glue to an area of wall or floor; she then allows the layers to dry before carefully removing the resulting epidermis. At the Florence Trust, Ramsay has become fascinated by the building's red brick walls, and is exploring different ways of lifting surfaces of the church without infringing its delicate Grade 1 listed paintwork. Her works have a political undertow: their titles might refer to recent military conflicts, death tolls, or sites of anguish (eg, *Wailing Walls*, 2009). Sudden blooms and bursts of colour suggest blood and death - it's as if we're viewing destruction from a drone or helicopter - creating unsettling abstractions that flicker strangely between quasi-figurative landscapes and deft materiality.

Reflecting on the cinematic and sign-based qualities of the city, **Annelore Schneider's** video and photographic are reflections on global urbanity in locations as diverse as Los Angeles, London and Chongqing. Schneider frequently works as part of art group collectif_fact, alongside

artist Claude Piguet. Referencing Nelson Goodman's nominalist philosophy, *Ways of Worldmaking* (2010) is a video in which an American actor delivers portentous but platitudinous lines from movie trailers. *Hitchcock Presents* (2010) features a soundtrack from a trailer for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) synched to a roaming video-tour of le Corbusier's Maison Blanche at la-chaux-de-fonds, Switzerland. This amusing video brings to the fore the psychological austerity of le Corbusier's proto-minimal home, and its hidden Gothic potential: built in 1912 for the architect's parents, they found it unbearable and left it as soon as they could. Schneider is currently working on a series of digitally altered photographs of London high streets, in which the lower storey has been ablated - creating a surreal urban displacement in which shop signs rest abruptly on the pavement.

Ehryn Torrell is a painter who is fascinated by the wreckage of the built environment in war and natural disaster. She finds in it metaphors for grief, mourning and loss. A keen reader of theoretical texts, from Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2008) to David Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* (2000), Torrell paints images of personal encounters she has had in areas whose buildings - or ruins - speak of both socio-economic and personal narratives. Having visited Sichuan Province, China, shortly after the terrible earthquake of 2008, Torrell painted images of ruination and of improvised housing in urban slums. She has also painted images of family homes in order to come to terms with her own mother's death. Torrell has also collaborated with Schneider on a project

titled *Song For Others* (2011): the work was made on a residency in Guelph, Canada, and is a composition with 90 participants who recorded songs that they have previously sung for someone else during moments of affection or comfort.

Adam Watts creates mixed media sculptural assemblages, installations and environmental interventions. He often designs pieces that can be walked over, through or around. Installed at the James Taylor Gallery in London, Watts' *Half Built Sight* (2010) was an array of rough plaster walls, whose unearthly strangeness suggested a stage set for a science fiction or horror film - dark imaginings of hermetic self-building. Watts' sculptures seek to activate an imagined space within the everyday, to create ways of thinking in and through space that open up new narrative and ambulatory possibilities. At other times, his works resemble the tinkering of a deranged scientist. *Untitled* (2011), for example, is a raft-like sculpture made from bits of scavenged wood, nails and plaster, that echoes mid-century visionary architectural models and sketches by Constant Nieuwenhuys, Yona Freedman or Hans Hollein. A larger scale work is *The Two Beacons*, 2010, a mixed media sculpture of freestanding beacons, the top parts of which rotate. Beacons suggest fragility, survival and danger, while their scale and improvised quality suggest a solid capacity to thrive in adversity - it is between these existential polarities that Watt's work thrives.

Andy Wicks' paintings depict objects that might initially appear otherworldly or imagined, but are in fact real structures for mooring boats that can be seen - should you look - dotted along the River Thames. Existing some place in the no-man's land between improvisation and ordinary functionality, they appear alternately too decrepit for use, or else modern, robust and sturdy. These mooring stations are called 'dolphins', an appellation that seems arbitrary given their utter lack of physical resemblance to the marine creature. Also seemingly arbitrary is their *ad hoc* composition and materiality: they can be built out of anything from pressure-treated pine to hardwood, reinforced concrete, or steel girders and tubes. Here, form follows function - but there is also a unity to their robust armature and tide-washed weathering, rusty iron, and agglutinated patches of algae fronds. Wick's paintings have a striking figure-ground contrast: the background are often rendered with a muddy-watery effect created by mixing resins, thinned oil paints and other thinners, which the artist irritates into eddies of bare canvas and coagulated paint - a process that echoes the flow of the river itself.

Each artist here explores, in a very different manner, the pressures of urban life, the leftover traces and potentiality of history or extant cultural artefacts and iconographies. They mine the city's mother lode of metaphors, ideational oddities, and surreal imaginings; they add their own structures to the mix as well - as if the only course of action in the face of so many ruins, is to create a new Frankenstein's monster, one in which

modernism's pure visions of *terra incognita* is rendered just one more historical fact.