



## Deep Surfaces

Over the last decade, Jason Moad's driving thematic interest has been upon the singular human subject in the environment. Alienated figures set against profoundly silent Melbourne street scenes, *Rückenfigures* lost in thought before primordial landscapes, or dreamlike encounters between animals and humans in uncanny urban spaces evoke in various ways artists such as De Chirico, Caspar David Friedrich, Edward Hopper, Jeffery Smart, and Rick Amor. The sense of remoteness and alienation in those works is emotionally palpable but also literally true. All are removed from the space of production, from the site of patient labour in which these scenes are brought to life. The paintings in this exhibition, *Tangible*, Moad's latest solo exhibition, turns our attention to the Still Life genre and thus also to the objects that surround the artist in his home studio. These are the objects in immediate proximity to the painter and to the act of conjuring of these other spaces, as if they too were observing silently and waiting patiently for the artist to finally turn his devotional, even puritanical, gaze upon them.

*Tangible* draws its subject matter from the Artist's own collection of books, VHS cassettes, CDs, records, assorted figurine-collectables and other ornamental curios. Like painting, and the body itself, these "residual media" are marshalled together as a re-affirmation (as the exhibition title suggests) of the analogue and the material within the dominant paradigm of the digital and the virtual. The objects Moad selects however are not exactly humble or anonymous. Rather they are the objects we hold on to because they are tied to our own sense of identity. Moad's paintings depict the things we deploy (or at least used to deploy before social media) to project that identity, that conspicuously display our tastes in literature, music, and popular culture; or substantiate our intellectual credentials (and pretensions) to those who enter our home or office.

Books, perhaps the most potent example of the self-presentational power of objects, are appropriately Moad's central motif. (Before embarking on a life as a painter Moad considered perusing the vocation of a writer.) Paperbacks, potboilers and penguin classics, assorted reference books and the artist's treasured collection of Artist monographs are variously piled-up and stacked into weighty towers or sometimes configured into visual puns, such as in *Nothing Like the Sea*, 2016 or *The House Of Beautiful Lies*, 2016. All are depicted in minute detail that reveals, amongst other things, these books have already been handled and read, already owned or borrowed—already tied to a reader. Indeed many of these works, particularly when concentrated into their various sub-genres, do reveal the artist's own tastes in literature and popular fiction. *The Secret History Of Rock*, 2014/16, for example, becomes a shrine to Moad's musical heroes while *Dinosaurs*, 2014, acknowledges his major artistic influences. And while many titles are selected for their narrative function or formal properties—the need for a splash of pure colour at a certain juncture in the composition—we cannot escape the book's signifying work when it's closed. Moad's sometimes casual, sometimes playful, stackings of these titles belies our awareness that we are being sized-up by what we read when what we read becomes public. So conscious is the artist of the reception of these objects as sublimated self-portraits that some titles—you will have to guess—have been painted with fake library call numbers so as to distance book from identity.

Of course these physical objects have to go somewhere, and according to a visual arrangement in which they can be re-accessed, but they are also unavoidably performative, always positioning their possessors sense of self in relation to other selves and their object collections. They are objects displayed for the

purpose of selection, but they are also selected—long before their likeness has been fixed in oil paint—for the purpose of display.

Whether intuitively or strategically, the works in *Tangible*, amplify this other presentational role of objects. *Mnemosyne*, 2016, is perhaps the most articulate concentration of this. The work again depicts an arrangement from the artist's collection of books and other "outmoded" media including a cassette tape, a CD, and a human skull behind which sits a 12 inch LP like some makeshift vinyl halo. The highly saturated local colour palette and the striped-back even clinical treatment of the background however insinuates the world of glossy fashion magazines, studio backdrops and slick commercial advertising. The painting's pristine just-made-a-minute-ago surfaces operate along-side subtle indications of the objects' wear and use. Combined with the self-conscious home-display arrangement, *Mnemosyne* richly activates the relationship between the public and the private. We are invited to ponder the various tensions between the unique and the generic and between personal identity and identity signalling. It evokes for me similar "domestic" arrangements we might find in the new "disruptive" space of Air B&B accommodation. Somewhere inside this curious hybrid of generic hotel room and private domicile, objects such as these exist in an uncertain state between personal effects and commercial packaging.

The realist technique and the larger than life scale of *Tangible's* motifs helps open the work to these activations by enabling the viewer to fully register every surface, both its mass produced and idiosyncratic details. *Twenty-Sixteen (The Damnation Game)*, 2017, in the tradition of the vanitas Still Life, depicts, unusually in this series, just two objects: a crumbling Clive Barker novel and a human skull which rests on top. Both skull, a staple of the traditional memento mori, and novel, with its torn and peeling spine and yellowed pages, offer us an optical pleasure in the simulacra of things but also, of course, a not too subtle reminder of our own mortality—of our own physical disintegration and death via the same yellowing process of oxidation. We can see however that the skull is clearly a mint condition replica and, like the paperback, is infinitely repeatable and mass-producible as though we might after all be offered immortality...at a price. It is not that this interpretation necessarily comports with the artist's (for I would wager he would have preferred to depict a real human skull if only he happened to have one) but that the artist's deep attention to the surface qualities of things brings nuance and complexity to these otherwise more obvious visual statements.

For me, Moad has always been a painter interested, perhaps above all else, in describing surface and in the infinite contrasts and subtleties to be found between surfaces. The simple pleasure in viewing his work owes much to his expanding power to articulate those subtleties and transduce the modalities of touch and sight. In his paintings of the figure in the environment this overriding predilection can sometimes come at the cost of sacrificing the air between objects. Subject and surface, technique and content, however find a new synergy in this body of work.

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