

## **Nigel Milsom: Judo House Part 4 (Golden Mud)**

Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney

20 October - 19 November 2011

Over the course of two articles in *Art in America* critic Raphael Rubinstein has developed a series of terms to define a feature of recent painting he calls provisionality. According to Rubinstein, provisional paintings look 'casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling' and, using the look of a painting as an index of painterly ambition, he suggests provisional painters embrace the 'lure of the unfinished' in order to exploit 'the uses of doubt'. Christopher Wool, Martin Kippenberger, Francis Picabia and Richard Tuttle mark the higher ground of provisionality in Rubinstein's genealogy, although he acknowledges its source may lie deeper, in the 'foundational skepticism' of painterly Modernism. (Think here perhaps of Cezanne's doubt.)

On the face of it Rubinstein's argument seems a little stretched. Failure has never been a career option for very many painters in as much as few deliberately choose it. Too many achieve it by default. How many painters would embrace fully the provisional tag, knowing that any turning away from 'strong' painting, as Rubinstein puts it, risks 'inconsequence'? And, if failure is knowing, is it failure? Is Rubinstein's model of provisionality a register of failure of ambition or a refusal of ambition? Rubinstein would never mistake grunge for slacker, but when he writes of Albert Oehlen, a painter of 'bad' Neo-Expressionism who committed himself to large-scale abstraction in the late 1980s because he wanted to be taken seriously, the distinction gets fuzzy. Perhaps provisionality simply registers a different kind of painterly ambition.

It is possible to see Rubinstein's scheme degenerating into a list as to who is and isn't really self-cancelling and who is simply failing despite themselves, but this would trivialise his frames of reference which are big indeed. What Rubinstein points to, if indirectly, is the way painters announce their ambition, and how they seek to situate themselves historically. In any discussion of how a specific painter embarks upon a practice according to his or her own understanding of painting's stakes, questions of intentionality and art historical self-awareness loom large.

For a local read on this, one could do worse than look at the Art Gallery of New South Wales's annual art prize trifecta of the Archibald, Wynne and Sulman for clearly announced ambition and art historical self-awareness. The 2012 Archibald-winner, Tim Storrier's *The Histrionic Wayfarer (After Bosch)* was a highly performative self-portrait that nodded to big themes: mortality, artistic self-presentation, the Bible, and an Old Master. Imants Tillers's *Waterfall (after Williams)*, the Wynne winner, cemented Tillers's metamorphosis from conceptualist to landscape painter, invoking Fred Williams specifically, and indirectly Eugene von Guerard and the transformation of the Australian landscape tradition effected by contemporary Aboriginal art. It is not a stretch to say that both paintings worked to affirm the position of their makers as artists. This is what prizes do, by staging these contests of ambition and self-definition for an eager public (and press) that extends well beyond the boundaries of the art world, a situation that Storrier has called an anomaly in international contemporary art. Anomalous or not, judge Richard Bell's 2011 Sulman choice, Peter Smeeth's *The Artist's Fate*, addressed the theatricality (and the stakes) of the enterprise directly, in its depiction of a rejected painter, eviscerated, emasculated, and mocked by masked devils. Smeeth's literalness only heightened the self-awareness: this is the artist as performer, playing to the crowd.

By contrast, Nigel Milsom's 2012 Sulman winning interior of a betting shop, *Judo House Part 4 (Golden Mud)*, registered in a decidedly minor key, with Milsom telling the press, 'I don't get too caught up in the struggle of it [painting]'. Prompted by the loneliness of old men and referring obliquely to late Australian writer Randolph Stow's novel *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984), Milsom's work is part of an eponymous series shown at Yuill/Crowley in Sydney late last year. That series, based loosely on gambling and the annual Wentworth Park Golden Easter Egg, the world's richest greyhound race, showed Milsom using local—and déclassé—subject matter to tackle what he calls a 'a universal truth... (the) human drive attracted to seeing, subjecting, provoking, and enjoying others' triumphs or misery'.



Nigel Milsom, 'Judo House Part 4 (Golden Mud)', 2011. Exhibition installation view, Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney.

Most of the thirteen works on view featured greyhounds. While animals, real and imaginary, have been a stylistic fixture in contemporary art for more than a decade (particularly if stuffed), dog pictures trade in a different genealogy, spanning George Stubbs at one end and dogs-playing-pool prints at the other. Part of the force of these paintings lay in the audacity of Milsom's choice of subject matter. (He has also produced heroically over-sized paintings of orchids.) At the same time, like Stubbs, Milsom could suggest the particular temperament of individual creatures, so that their role as human analogues for his 'universal truth' was never too far from the surface. Working from his own photographs and sketches, in addition to racing magazines, Milsom exploited the conventions of sports photography as well with the group action shot, close ups in action, and portraits.

In previous exhibitions Milsom's paintings have tended to look like paintings of pictures rather than things that have an existence in the world. Realism was not an overriding concern and most of his work displayed a mulling over or thinking through about the stakes of painting and representation. This was evident in a project show curated by Ewen McDonald for law firm Allens Arthur Robinson early in 2011, where Milsom showed work depicting birds, houses, orchids, paper dolls, and men doing judo, work whose monochromatic look masked a subtle use of tints to intensify what he has called 'the tonal impact of the image'. Colour was much more evident in the Yuill/Crowley show, nowhere more so than in a painting which simply showed a group of boldly numbered racing capes, minus their canine wearers. Its flat graphic quality gave one indication of where Milsom might go with subsequent work, a very different place to those indicated by the pseudo-psychological profiles of haunted beasts, the analysis-in-motion paintings of running hounds, or the almost Hopperesque urban anomie conjured up in his Sulman entry.

Hopper is probably the wrong comparison here— Milsom is more interested in making demands on paint—but he and Christopher Wool both feature among those artists Milsom admires, along with Hokusai, Ryman, Richter, Tuymans, Cullen, MacPherson, and Katz. According to Milsom, a painting is successful only 'when it announces the limits of painting and shows you that whatever the image is, it's a painting—a fabrication operating in very clear space ... whether it's illusion or not, it is just paint—a material substance that can stand for many things'. 'Strong' painting, in Rubinstein's terms, may have no business with dog pictures, flower paintings or crowd-pulling art prizes. Milsom's 'just paint' argument, coupled with the range and lightly-worn reticence of his references, nevertheless announce an ambition with a clear understanding of painting's stakes.

Ingrid Periz, 'Nigel Milsom: Judo House Part 4 (Golden Mud)', *Eyeline*, no. 76, 2012, pp.79.