

WORM RUNNER'S DIGEST

MITCHELL
DONALDSON

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Throughout our many discussions, Donaldson has continuously aimed at an ambiguity of definition, and revels in his works' capacity to be so difficult. Over the past several years or more, he has developed a visual language through his contemporary painting practice that begins to make sense in series. A good example and entry point into Donaldson's language is his 2015 series, *StaleMates*. Not quite portraits, this series consisted of simple shapes, cut out and collaged onto layered surfaces, imaginatively resembling faces. The power of these works is not only that they reveal the desire for people to see and apply anthropomorphic traits, but that it is so much easier to do so than to describe, and make meaning in the work materially. The ambiguous portraits of *StaleMates*, reflect his awareness for how he wants his practice to be argued, a tussle he keeps firmly locked in the physical, material world. The 2015 series suspends an argument between figurative and abstract painting, through the lens of an elegant material investigation. An intent language, that has since matured into something much harder to decipher, in the energetic and intense work of *Worms Runner's Digest*.

Since *StaleMates*, Donaldson's motifs have developed to include more complex formal habits and codes. Sense is located in the relationships of formal things such as line, shape, colour and collage, occurring within each work, and between them. Hesitant to use the word 'autonomous', it is important that everything to be had of the work, is to be found within it. Though some pieces may include symbols, meaning is not beholden to them. For Donaldson, this is a deliberate statement of material responsibility; meaning is not always somewhere else.

From the outset, Donaldson doesn't know what he's going to paint. His decisions only informed by the last 6 canvases that he has heartlessly painted over, or a

quick sketch he has done, the composition of which he usually poorly imitates in the following painting. He applies his paint in numerous ways, with his fingers, brushes, sprays, will wipe off, scratch back and over the top of all this, carefully glue drawings of the offending sketch, if there is one. The mountain of work painted over is startling. The spontaneous process is at once fast and slow, but relentlessly, materially led. In Donaldson's practice, it's not what paint and representation can do to symbols, but how the material and formal relationships between and within his work, can represent a way of being through connectedness and co-dependence. However, the path to this lofty idea is all but serious.

Within each work comes a humour and light-heartedness which is hard to miss and a joy to discover. The green grid, of one of my favourites, *Trellis*, is such a silly stand-in for the picture plane that it continues to make me smirk. Though poorly executed, Donaldson understands and trusts the grid will persist to establish a flat space, a setup for several fat pink worm things to create depth, winding themselves through, above and below this plane. Travelling through virtual space, on and off the canvas, his worms almost didactically riff on the physical limits of the medium, reminding the viewer to experience the work as a flat, material object. Adding an extra layer of humour, the worms activate movement but don't offer gesture. Conversely, the plane should be static, but instead, promotes the greatest presence of actual time, in the jolting green lines formed through the rapid movements of the artist's hand. Here, the mention of the worm is no joke, a coded but enduring motif appearing in much of his recent work. The worm, softly swimming, eating, pooin' and enriching its way through the third dimension, is important for it embodies the material and ecological motivations, behind Donaldson's practice.

Though it's easy to refer to the pink lines of *Trellis* as worms and hence imply allegorical meaning, they are not strictly symbols of worms, nor does Donaldson wish for his audience to only see worms. The fact that the long pink things might as well be understood as wriggling thick lines with drop shadows, is crucial. As much as a resemblance to worms, the potential in the physicality of line, is where he is trying to encourage meaning. Throughout the series, line is defined in different ways, most obviously by the thick and contrasting coloured worm ones, and most covertly around the edges of shapes and colours. These lines,

used to define the borders of different shapes, illustrate how the smaller areas of each painting are informed by each other, connecting and overlapping to form a larger object, dependant on the workings within it.

The gentle, Tiptoe, is a great example of the latter, looking through and tracing the few and seemingly incomplete layers, we may begin to understand the construction process. Beginning in the bottom right corner, the small area of apparently untouched primed canvas reveals an ordering to the layers, rare to the pieces of this series. This area, suggests the yet uncovered green line coming forth from the edge of the painting, was perhaps the first mark of the piece. From this point, the line can be traced branching beneath transparent layers, shaping the beginnings of the composition. Patches of colour fill the spaces created, before being painted over in layers of transparent skin-tone, red and finally, a sky-blue. Following the exteriors of the sky-blue shapes we can see how they trace, crisscross, and are informed by the earlier green lines and subsequent layers. Before ending back in the bottom right corner, completing the near symmetrical shape of the skin-tone, balanced by the uncovered green line. At this point, Tiptoe offers something close to closure, yet in the midst of this tracing, another gentle but significant green line appears from the upper blue shape to form a stylised foot. Lightweight and without volume, the line doesn't disrupt the overall visual impact, but stands defiantly in the face of how the rest of the image should be read. The most 'traditional' example of drawing of the series, doubles as the most problematic.

Each of the discussed paintings looks vastly different, and could confidently be stand-alone works. Furthermore, the entire series appears as an assemblage of independent objects. Even still, occupying the work is an argument for the viewer to relate to each one through material and formal means, expressed through a self-aware construction of non-hierarchical and interconnected parts. The relationships between the individual paintings are the same as the relationships between the parts of the paintings. Together and connected, they begin to define the whole. An ideology, embodied not just by the individual pieces themselves, but also in installation. All in all, an understanding of practice built from the bottom up, where the abstracted 'up' is hard to find, kind of like a pyramid - but only the bottom layer, and all the blocks are scattered.

Suspended in space on taught strings, the installation method further express this sentiment. Paintings, small and large, are arranged seemingly willy-nilly, the room has no centre and neither does the work. Smaller paintings are suspended in view of larger ones, and in the way of other sight lines all together. Suddenly, and not un-like a sculpture, our point of view determines our experience. All of Donaldson's antagonism towards the picture plane gets pulled into the sculptural dimension. Collage and composition become a shared effort. The supposed sudden and comprehensive experience of painting is corrupted by time. Of course, this is the time-based relation to art mined by minimalism, and now taken for granted by many an installation artist. In this case however, paintings floating in space endure as paintings. The objects are not presented as gestalt compositions of depth and volume, but 2D shapes of opposing sides. The information is still located on and within each plane, which we understand as non-naive viewers, is traditionally best understood from a vantage point established with the centre of your picture being about 1550mm from the deck.

The installation is about movement, perspective, time and connectedness, all emphasised by our changing physical position in relation to the installation, an empowering process for the viewer. Walking through the gallery, we get to play with, and are responsible for, relationships between line and shape that are now occurring in real space, as we literally create new collages while travelling through the gallery. The embodiment of co-dependence, promoted in the internal logic of each work, now extends to the viewer; this is the message and key driving influence of Donaldson's practice. Each work is a separate entity, defining itself through a language developed in series, presented together to form a whole that invites us, as viewers, to be a part of. Collectively, the exhibition asks of us to recognize, and take responsibility for our part in this ecology.

Benjamin Crowley