

BRICK, BLOCK, INK, STONE

'Magical Thinking' new works by Craig Coulthard

Curated by Hugo Barclay

Sierra Metro, Leith

September 3rd – 25th

Craig Coulthard's latest exhibition, featuring new works produced over the last two years, is currently on show at Leith's Sierra Metro gallery. The title 'Magical Thinking' conjures that thinking-into-being which is the crux of the artistic process. Craig and I spoke about this process, the omniscience of the artist, and his aim to find a resting place between the pragmatic and the mystical.

A recurring symbol here, emblematic of this magical thinking, are the Pictish stones that proliferate these works, replacing the human figures of the original ukiyo-e prints that are the basis. Ukiyo-e was a Japanese art movement from the 17th -19th century which addresses locations and individuals of significance with a modest, daily reverence characterized by graphic linework and flat spaces.

Craig and I wrestled with the gravity of the Pictish stones and I admired how he spoke of the finality of the linework that carves them, that results in their strange solemnity. We spoke of the ancient completeness of these stones, how they appear already arrived at and how the weight of the line signifies something definitive.

This sense of certainty holds an appeal for Craig, who's reverence of craft is evident in the delicate, minuscule brushwork required to bring these images into being. In speaking on craft, Craig brought up Chinese scholar stones, and their Japanese counterpart, *suiseki* – stones collected throughout millennia by literati as representations of the natural world. These stones hold an appeal for the artist in that they liberate nature from the Western notion of the sublime. Speaking on scholar stones, John Mendelsohn writes in artnet.com, 'nature made art in its own image, an eccentrically evocative fractal of itself.' In the *suiseki* tradition, these stones are categorized into two – landscape and animal figures, and so we see Craig employing the Pictish stones to perform the figurine function in his work, in an anachronistic cultural fusion between the ancient Picts and Edo-era Japan.

We spoke about how these stony source materials made themselves known to the artist, and of the two years of national lockdown that provided a strange space for research. The digitisation efforts of institutions like the National Gallery, whose paintings are not only able to view, but can be zoomed-in and virtually mined for details and minutiae. The works of Renaissance painter Carlo Crivelli feature in this exhibition, adding 15th century Italy to our temporal itinerary. Craig spoke on the importance of not relying on his own powers of imagination, but looking outwardly, digesting source materials, resulting in a culmination of two years of work.

I, too, have now trawled through the National Gallery archives, zooming into Crivelli's weird world: a late-Gothic golden environment where God looms, asynchronous and out-of-sight. A key manipulation of the

original paintings is the cropping, in which the artist beheads Saint Jerome and Sir Thomas Aquinas just below the eyes, leaving only the pious slightly-pursed mouths and inverting the focus from the saints to the architecture in their hands (one painted doorway has another holy man lurking in the darkness, a delightful little detail carried over from the original.)

The effect is humorous, a post-modern wink-and-nudge that reaches a new height in the painting 'Lookers Disco' – a monochrome painting that advertises a church like a rock-band.

By working with this lexicon of magical imagery and applying these anachronisms, Craig creates a collage of surrealist elements that, as he states in the exhibition's press release, exists 'somewhere between diagram and dreams.' We spoke about de-mystifying, how certain symbols and icons become almost too revered over time to the detriment of their original essence, Craig's

treatment of these images, enmeshed in that 'daily reverence' of the ukiyo-e prints, is a kind of antiseptic in the wounds caused by time's arrow.

Indeed, the magical thinking of the artist is no match for time. Craig artifies ageing in the application of crackle-paste, creating gorgeous tiny chasms in the canvas that hold not only paint, but a chimeric history and speaks to the artist's exploration of in-between states and liminal spaces. Stand close and observe, and let the eye follow the bold linework that traverses place and time, from the Pictish stone to the Japanese print, culminating in the contemporary homages we find here. Take a moment to be still and marvel at the brick, block, ink and stone.

By Cheryl McGregor