

## **BOSS | An Exhibition of work by Richard Ballinger, Toby O'Brien, Jesse Leroy Smith, Volker Stox**

PZ Gallery, Penzance, 13 -20 September 2019

Staged at Penzance's PZ Gallery for a week in September, BOSS represented a purposeful if speculative collaboration between four Cornish-based painters. As an acronym of their names – Ballinger, O'Brien, Smith and Stox – the exhibition title was not intended as an assertion of masculine power; in fact, many of the works included were mediations on male aspirations and vulnerability. The capital letters of BOSS could be better read as a declaration of their friendship, and shared desire to discover common ground in their individual explorations of human experience. They all believe in the potential of art to create alternative communities. Through the works presented and live events opening and closing the show, BOSS promoted an exuberant, independent spirit, a celebration of love, life and camaraderie through art, music and dance. This attitude or intention is reflected in Jesse Leroy Smith's recent comment about his motivations as an artist: 'I want to make work that harnesses how spontaneous, urgent and precarious life is. The artwork can trigger projects, collaborations and experiences that make life more vital and meaningful'.<sup>1</sup>

The show evolved around a series of rediscovered, large scale figurative paintings produced by German-born artist Volker Stox in West Berlin in the early 1980s. For his friends, the 'raw audacity' and subject matter of these paintings provided a timely focal point for the exhibition. This November marks the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Prior to this, West Berlin had become an enclave of bohemian freedoms, contrasting not only with the culturally repressed Eastern bloc, but also offering an alternative to the bourgeois politeness prevailing in West Germany at that time. West Berlin's hot-house atmosphere fostered a closely networked, experimental art and music scene in which everyone mingled, regardless of fame or status.

Stox trained as an architect in London before becoming an artist. In the early 1980s, with the intention of loosening up his painting he decided to return to West Berlin, then associated with the emergence of 'Heftige Malerei' (free painting), a neo-expressionist, figurative style. During the winter of 1982 and 1983 he rented a small studio in Kreuzberg, a rundown part of town, which had become a centre of alternative culture. The result was a series of works that capture his wild, nocturnal lifestyle dancing in such clubs and bars as Der Dschungel (The Jungle), Bar Risiko (Risk), and the Metropole 'Loft'. For BOSS a selection of these works was spot-lit in a darkened space and accompanied by a sound track of indie dance music evoking Stox's memories of early 1980s Berlin. The paintings express the energy, creativity and sense of possibility that characterised the city's thriving subculture at that time. Painting furiously and late into the night, using large brushes and buckets of paint, his images were unpremeditated outpourings, exuding emotion and desire, capturing the exhilaration and sexual tensions he experienced on night-time forays.

Emotion and desire – as well as tenderness, self-reflection and failure – are also the subject of Smith's paintings and drawings, which focus on picturing the human subject, and communicating human feeling. Over the years he has accumulated sketchbooks filled with images of friends, family, heroes of film, music and literature and fragments from his travels, especially to Greece, that provide material for his work. While on a residency in Berlin, he began drawing on tracing paper, which led him to make enigmatic portraits combining layers of coloured tissue and drawing, allowing

greater spontaneity and fluidity in his image making, as seen in a group of enigmatic collaged portraits included in the exhibition.

The layout of the PZ Gallery, with its front-facing wall of windows, provided an opportunity for Smith to exploit the poetic potential of glass as a painting support. Comprising a series of vignettes, his site-specific, monochrome frieze painted on the windows manipulated light and shadow to introduce an element of beauty and ephemerality. The windows of the former car showroom usually create a goldfish bowl effect, but Smith's mural created a temporary veil between inside and outside, filtering light into the space, particularly through the negative shapes of two wistful female figures profiled in repose, one smoking a cigarette the other smelling a flower. Throughout the day, the changing light animated the space, as shifting patterns fell across the floor. Gestural, rhythmic brushwork dancing across the main window conveyed a sense of fleeting pleasure, a feeling enhanced by such titles as *Forest Requiem* and *After the Summer*. But perhaps the most powerful sentiment was conveyed by *Family*, a tiny image of a pack of dogs, and *Father Figure*, the outlined head of a donkey – both derived from drawings made by his daughter when aged five. Alluding to the artist's intense love for his family, displayed together they also perhaps represent a poignant reflection on his own past failings as a lover and father. On a happier note, comfort was provided by *Solace*, an image of a woman's hands clasping a draped cloth.

Richard Ballinger's recent landscape paintings also explore the theme of solace, but from the memories of a child's perspective. Although made in Cornwall, where Ballinger has lived and worked since 1999, and occasionally informed by drawings, his series of exotically coloured, beautiful landscapes are symbolic meditations on formative experiences of a happy, carefree childhood in idyllic, rural Gloucestershire. In earlier works he painted lonely figures in the landscape. But in his more recent paintings the figures inside the painting have been replaced by the viewer standing in front of the image to avoid an overly determined narrative interpretation. It also encourages imaginative engagement, which is strongly felt, for example, when looking at *Blue Trees*. A protective wall of trees stretches across the foreground, beyond which a thin white line or path draws the eye up the picture plane towards a densely-packed copse of blue trees on the horizon. Perhaps like the artist as a child, we are taking refuge behind the trees, contemplating whether or not we dare to take the path into the unknown?

Ballinger's images, constructed with often thickly-impastoed interlocking shapes or blocks of colour, nod to the symbolic style of such post-impressionist painters as Paul Gauguin. His varied treatment of the painted surface, from meticulous application of small brushstrokes to vigorous scraping away and scoring, evidences the painting process over time. Commenting on his working method the artist has explained: 'I do not draw in the landscape I draw from it. It's taken inside me to the studio imagining how it should be... It's fun for me making up relative scenarios about my life which will automatically create the right picture for me. Photographs, newspaper articles and books will sometimes help the process. Sometimes if the images are not right, a deconstruction will then take place. This is my favourite part of the journey - the shifting, sanding and scraping of paint, unearthing a brief history.'<sup>2</sup> On one level, then, happy memories of childhood freedoms – a time spent roaming the countryside seeking adventure and taking risks – might be seen as a perfect metaphor for the explorative act of painting itself.

For Toby O'Brien, the youngest of the participating artists, a laborious and intensive process of painting is used to address archetypal themes, to find through a deep engagement with the materials and actions of painting some kind of representation for thoughts, feelings and unconscious states of mind. His uncompromising, primal approach to mark-making, drawing on the example of such twentieth century artists as Antoni Tàpies, reminds his older friends of the need to get back to basics, to constantly question and reinvent their own work.

O'Brien's relatively small-scale paintings seem to represent a secret language of signs and symbols. The paintings begin with a layer of gesso paint, which is then scraped back over a period of months, heavily worked, rubbed down, incised and scored to create a weathered, beaten-up surface. Unconscious marks, doodles, blotches and chance drips of viscous paint combine with an earthy palette of brown, ochre and red. The resulting images look like prehistoric cave walls inscribed with marks resembling early human attempts at self-representation. A bull motif emerges in a number of his works – a well-used metaphor, notably for example by Pablo Picasso, for a potent yet flawed masculinity. But O'Brien's marks also suggest contemporary graffiti, or the worn down surface of an old school desk, chiselled by the compass of a bored schoolchild. Ultimately, they might be read as acts of seeking self-knowledge, appearing – as Smith has observed – 'like a mirror caked in mud, smeared to find some semblance of recognition. Like the wall of a detention centre scrawled in numerals and symbols of hope'.

Although each pursuing their own visual language, the four artists presented work that was rich in emotional content, evoking a range of different moods. But the overwhelming, accumulative impression was of an irrepressible passion for life.

Virginia Button

---

<sup>1</sup> Statement provided by the artist in an email dated 3 September 2019. Much of this essay is based on conversations with the four participating artists during the installation of the exhibition and supplementary information provided by them.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.plumblinestives.co.uk/plumblinestives.co.uk/Richard\\_Ballinger.html](http://www.plumblinestives.co.uk/plumblinestives.co.uk/Richard_Ballinger.html)