

JULIET

contemporary art magazine since 1980

INTERVIEWS

Numb Tongue. Interview with Ryan Mrozowski

Posted on Tuesday November 29th, 2016

On the occasion of his recent solo exhibition at Arcade in Lonon, “Numb Tongue”, we met and talked with Ryan Mrozowski...

Sara Buoso: I saw the group exhibition – I Hear You Singing in the Wire – here at Arcade before, and this is a nice chance to know more about your work. I know this is your first solo-show here in the UK, with Arcade. How did this collaboration start and what took you here, especially during this week [of the Frieze Art Fair]?

Ryan Mrozowski: I haven’t shown my work internationally much yet, only in group shows, so this is my first solo-exhibition in a commercial gallery outside the US. The gallery that I work with in the United States [On Stellar Rays] knew Christian [Mooney, owner of Arcade]. He saw my work at a group show and we did a studio visit last spring. I just really loved the way he spoke about my work and the dialogue we’ve had, and his program certainly provides an interesting context for my work.

S.B: I was intrigued by the title of the exhibition: Numb Tongue.

R.M: I try to make exhibitions where the collected works can be treated almost like language, like individual words that are strung together to make (hopefully) poetic sentences, creating a more complex meaning than can be found in the narrative of an individual work. For me it is exciting to juxtapose imagery that doesn’t initially relate so clearly, and this extends to the exhibition title. With *Numb Tongue* I loved the suggestion of an impeded spoken language or the effort to articulate an idea, because my work deals with troubled or interrupted pictures. For example, there is a painting in the show where some parts of the picture have been omitted – so the idea of a garbled text and trouble articulating spoken language, is parallel to this troubled visual language.



Ryan Mrozowski, *Untitled (Floating leaves)*, 2016. Acrylic on linen, 30 x 23" / 76.2 x 58.4 cm

S.B: I can see an irony in this sense. Is this discourse about irony and language a critique?

R.M: Rather than critique, my work is trying to complicate an accepted understanding of the world. I use easily understandable, banal imagery, like dogs, birds, trees and flowers. Through the way I apply paint or how I choose to render an image incompletely – double it, or pull it apart – this ordinary, even generic, imagery, can become mysterious and complicated.

S.B: From what I've seen of your work, your subject matter is related to nature and animals. Why this decision?

R.M: The natural imagery is a counterpoint to the artificial, pictorial game that I am playing. I enact manufactured interventions, like obscuring and cutting, against the unaffected imagery of animals and plants. There is also a rich art-historical lineage of artists looking out at the world and the environment around them, and somewhere in me is the desire to participate in that history of painting, to use and subvert the expectations of landscape and still life painting.

S.B: In the press release, there is a reference to Georges Perec's 'A Man Asleep', which describes a vision from appearances to shadows, by insisting on the term 'growing'. Why have you thought of this?

R.M: Often I get painting ideas from reading novels. I read 'A Man Asleep' while working on this show. It perfectly captured much of what happens for me in the studio. I am often working with many different bits and fragments of images from sources like catalogues and encyclopedias on plant-life or animal-life; I often have scraps and studies all over the floor, and I try to stare at them until they become more abstract and suggestive of other imagery. The Perec text captures that blank meditative state which becomes a generative force.

S.B: That is a different approach. You don't look at the material to apply language to it, but the opposite.

R.M: There is a logic to an image, that indicates to me what I might do to it as an artist. I am interested in how a simple, direct act like duplicating, replicating or imposing geometry, can change the meaning of a picture.

S.B: The first time I saw your work, it reminded me of Max Ernst, and I would like to ask you about your relationship to Surrealism.

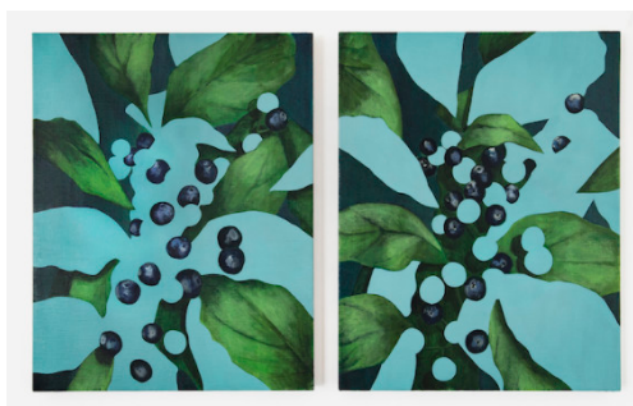
R.M: I try not to have a very direct relationship to any specific reference, whether it is an art-historical or contemporary source. I do love the sense of play and existential prodding that I see in artists like Ernst or writers like Perec. A slight level of absurdity provides a nice friction to the viewing/reading experience. When I put together an exhibition I try to find the right mix of imagery and forms that cause the works to become estranged from each other, so that rather than being direct reference-points, they act on each other obliquely, tangentially.

S.B: You like to be defined as a painter, but you also work with drawing and digital tools, often translating the digital into painting, a traditional medium. That's very interesting.

R.M: In *Untitled* I stretched linen over small pieces of wood and cobbled these many individual paintings into a coherent whole; in *Untitled (Dot)* I physically drilled into the surface of



Ryan Mrozowski, *Untitled*. 2016. Acrylic on linen, wood frame, 17 x 13 3/4" / 43.2 x 34.9 cm



Ryan Mrozowski, *Untitled (Pair)*, 2016. Acrylic on linen, 23 x 18" / 58.4 x 45.7 cm (each)

the painting and embedded this polka dot pattern. I try to be open to the suggestions made by the imagery; these become a material to make the art. I use painting as a lens to look at the world, rather than restricting myself to a specific way of working. I was trained as a painter and painting is the backbone of my practice, but I think of it [painting] as a verb, rather than a noun.

S.B: Because of this, your work is very intriguing. The imagery you are using is very ordinary, I don't want to say that it is pop...

R.M: I think of it as graphic. I am drawn to imagery that has both a quick read and a slower, more mysterious way of presenting itself over time. As a painter, I deal with images that draw the viewer to look closer, to question and complicate their initial reading. For example, in the diptych *Untitled (Pair)* the same image is painted twice, except that what is rendered in the left panel is blank on the right, and vice versa. That an image can be simultaneously legible and resolved, and at the same time fall apart in a closer examination – this to me is a compelling place to work from.

S.B: Is this why you use pattern and repetition, marking the difference between two images?

R.M: Exactly, when something is repeated one is invited to notice the difference between them, and that can be an interesting space for the viewer to enter.

S.B: What about the drawing technique? Is that something different or is it the way you start?

R.M: Because my paintings can take weeks or even months to complete, especially for large paintings, it is nice to shift gears and work on something more immediate, like drawing. Usually this is the way ideas are generated – in smaller studies, sketches, and cut out fragments. I include drawings in my exhibitions to further expand the relationships between the works; in this exhibition I show a crude and direct drawing of layered and stacked dogs, juxtaposed against more lovingly rendered paintings.

S.B: You often title your works 'Untitled', but then you use descriptive words such as 'floating'...

R.M: Using 'Untitled' is a way for me to keep from telling the viewer what they should see. Often the words that are in the parenthesis in the title indicate how I refer to them in the studio, which points directly at the action that is employed in the piece. In the ambiguous 'untitled' space viewers are left to insert their own narrative, as they see the work.



Ryan Mrozowski, *Untitled (Stacked dog)*, 2016. Oil stick on paper, 22 x 30" / 55.9 x 76.2 cm



Installation view – Ryan Mrozowski – Numb Tongue. Courtesy Arcade Fine Art Gallery



Installation view – Ryan Mrozowski – Numb Tongue. Courtesy Arcade Fine Art Gallery

S.B: I think that from here, we can talk about the experience of your work, and you said two interesting points. One point was the relationship with language and the way you want to play with language, as if there is a materiality to it in the work, such as a sensual material that trigger the eyes, but also the sensuality within the text. The other point is your interest in the viewer completing your work.

R.M: I hope that my work allows room for the viewer to desire to complete the work, and to find the links between discursive imagery. The real challenge with my work lies in the easily recognizable and representational imagery. How much can I complicate this imagery and impede its legibility, while still guiding the viewer to a place of poetic resonance? I don't like to define what exactly it should be, but my hope is that it is there somewhere.

S.B: The work is clearly part of the art-historical lineage that you mentioned, but at the same time, your point of view is very contemporary. I see poetic references to still-life and nature but also there is poetry in the way you ask the viewer to reconstruct the image. There is a kind of free-play within the image.

R.M: I hope so, I like what you have just said. I feel like so much of our contemporary culture is based on the easy consumption of highly-graphic, legible, and instantly understood symbols and images. I feel that art, and painting in particular, has the responsibility to work against that passivity, and the power to create moments of confusion, moments for a more complex understanding of what we are seeing.

S.B: Have you ever experimented with other media, or with sculpture?

R.M: I've created digital animations and videos that I've shown previously alongside the paintings and drawings, and my work is somewhat sculptural. I think about ply and the thickness of an image – it's ineffable or totally abstract – like looking at a photograph and thinking about how thick that photograph should be. I treat a flat or digital space as a material thing to handle. Even when the final form of the work ends up being a traditional painting, the studies for it might be drawings that are physically cut out, or paper that is pasted together – I would not call that sculpture, but there is a tactile, sculptural way of handling the image.

S.B: I think that's what invites the viewer into your image. The image in itself is flat but at the same time the forms are plastic and within this volume and depth of the image, that's how you can enter the work.

R.M: My work uses the relationship of background and foreground almost like actors on a stage. I think of painting as a theatrical space that has a shallow depth and these actors, so to speak, can be moved around on that stage. There is a painting in this show – the *Untitled (Floating Leaves)* painting – where I removed or omitted parts of the plant's leaves and stems, so you see through to the background and the complete shadow cast by the plant. It interrupts the logic that you expect from the picture. One actor has been removed from the stage and I have always loved how that completely changes how we understand the overall tableaux. Much of my work is *almost* complete, *almost* resolved. I try to leave things that way, usually.

S.B: I understand that you are also curating your exhibitions. Do you see the curatorial side as a sort of reflective moment of your practice?

R.M: When the work is crystallized together and the ingredients are finalized into an exhibition – that is a magical moment for the artist. The freely-associative nature of how I am approaching the imagery translates into a similar experience for the viewer, and I hope to keep that game up. Previous exhibitions influence the next ones and change over time as new bodies of work are generated, as they come to exist alongside my other bodies of work. The meaning of each changes by the simple act of juxtaposition.

S.B: This moment of juxtaposition, which I recognize is a very important moment, it comes at the end, is that right? So, would you define your practice as 'random'?

R.M: Yes, I think that randomness can be a great generative force for an artist, as a tool for shifting through discourses and ideas. I work with a very pared-down repertoire of natural imagery, which is not random. But what happens to that imagery when I work in my studio is certainly open – I can completely change my mind about what something means. When I am in my studio there is a potential for symbols and motifs to take on a new meaning at any given time. To make something evocative, rather than descriptive, is at the heart of what I am trying to do in the work.

S.B: There is one element that is very new for the viewer in here. You ask the viewer to look beyond the flatness of an image, and I think this is something that we are not used to doing, because we tend too much to differentiate between images and art-images.

R.M: We are inundated by imagery all around us, all the time. Technology has allowed everyone to have a computer in their pocket that takes photos and videos and contributes to an endless stream of media. I think that it is the artist's job to challenge or complicate that, and I hope my paintings do that both in the way they withhold an easy narrative and by somehow creating visual feedback loops for the eye.

S.B: So that's perception, which triggers the eye in your paintings?

R.M: Yes, that is an area where I can create a suspension of understanding, or interrupt the legibility in a way that invites further reflection.