

Michael Cusack: sucking stones

Stephen Garrett

These assured new works by Michael Cusack speak. On first viewing, their evocative palette would have them hushed and remain quiet, almost silent. But this is not the case; they are much more meticulous than that. In conversation with the artist, Cusack spoke of how shape within painting, created strength in the work. For him, the idea of creating strong form, prescribes how the paintings speak. In our conversation, Cusack reminds me of Beckett's love for the shape of words and the sentence structure in which they exist. Beckett stated, "I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas... that [the] sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters." It is this determined neutrality that allows for Cusack's particular enunciation.

The rearrangement of shape within these paintings, is like seeing stones shift around the canvas, a searching for nodal order between the action and response. Beckett's *sucking stones* sequence helps to describe the process and repetitive values by which Cusack works:

Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were still four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones.

We are reminded here, that the problem with language is its limitations. It will never suffice to explain the experience or the systemic condition in which it exists. Although, Beckett searches for a methodology to rupture the limitations of the structure in which he writes. Writing allows for the shaping of thoughts, an in-built editing system permitting patterns to form into prearranged values. Writing does not however, account for the explanation of the experience. It is restricted by the inevitability to describe only what is being written. Structuring a style of linguistic entropy, allows the status of reality to

be maintained as an always-open dialogue or question. This applies to painting as well. Like the stones in Molloy's pockets, or the nodal shapes in Cusack's pictures, language is rearranged into an infinite number of formal possibilities. Perhaps this hints at the central point of Cusack's painting, as it does with Beckett: fashioning the shape of code, and the nature of language, both visual and written. This is also the strength of abstraction, to borrow from Kirk Varnedoe, "[...] a remarkable system of productive reductions and destructions that expands our potential for expression and communication."

In the exquisitely sensitive *Sandling* and *Nadar*, but especially in *Brandt*, we see the inscription, the untranslatable mark at work. Cusack's graphic scribble, beautifully gestural, is scratched deep into the surface. Its attestation is to unknown writing, or better still, the un-made word, onto (into) the surface: to inscribe, scratch and cut. It is here, where the primal mark sublimates the experience, in this case, of the landscape, and the description cannot be written, only scribbled. Cusack seems to poetically pull the earth out from under our feet. There is no point of constancy, the space is vertiginous, destabilising and without axis. The surface shifts—at times viewed as if in a photograph—head-on, front-on. Face first. This horizonless vantage point undermines our position to the canvas. I think this is what Cusack means when he says, 'I like to get behind the landscape. They're like blueprints, the structure of the landscape... These ones bare traces of memory, they're like my experience of the landscape, past and present.'

Although abstract, the paintings are full of rich evocations to other places. A landscape is remembered by our experience of it and on it, not by seeing through mediated terms. Once remembered though, our position is no longer stable: the spatial parameters have changed and

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the condition of reception is no longer clear. Importantly, however, Cusack does allow us to keep our bearings by creating a simple point of reference, with thin yellow, vertical lines; coordinates charting visible and invisible trajectories helping us to stay upright.

We see this as well, in *Eastman* and *Alys*, where the only point of reference, or assurance, is when the energy of the canvas has been cut open and then sealed with a tile of lino, adhered from behind. The small intricate grid of fibres organises the overall canvas, as the composition echoes outward around this elliptic point. The 'insertion' of a real object into the canvas, destabilises the hierarchical structure of the canvas even further: the separation between the centre and the periphery, the front and the back. Appearing from behind the surface through a cut in the canvas, forces the canvas into the space of the membrane—to be approached from both directions. This has an indexical relationship between the ordering of words and the structuring of the compositions. The completion of which, rests in the naming of the paintings.

When we look at some of the titles in Cusack's oeuvre, we can see the restructuring of words into new words, like *Okto*, *Mas* or *Perture*; the fragmentation of the pronounced into the written. This fracturing of the structure—to break its back, to reassemble—is only done within the inscribed. To pronounce the disavowed, a bastard *half-word*, in this instance, reduces the signifier to a wreck. It has no basis and will only remain within the symbolic order. Equally, when the word is known and directs to other places and languages, like *Aurum* (gold) or *Covent* (monastic garden). The logic here is the structuring of Cusack's canvas. The collapse of the picture plane, shifting the ground from external to internal, reassembling the image, keeps the image within, and aligned to the vernacular. We can determine that the act of naming anchors the image and creates not a secondary relationship to the image, but a primary structuring of the visual order. Just as language always precedes the image, for Cusack, it is needed to enclose the

image, to place the final shape onto the canvas.

And when the desire to suck took hold of me again, I drew again on the right pocket of my greatcoat, certain of not taking the same stone as the last time. And while I sucked it I rearranged the other stones in the way I have just described. And so on.

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