

Jennings Kerr

James Lieutenant
Beneath Pressure

These paintings float in their lightness, veils of pigment drift around in the air like fabric blowing in a breeze. Surfaces loaded with technique and a balance of control with more expressive mark. Pigments pushed and pulled, pressure applied to material with great thought and impressions taken with brush, sponge, screen, rag, and hands. These paintings pull you in and despite their subtlety they have you questioning the complexity of the skins of colour. I have always found the relationship of the photographic and painted gesture to be very well resolved in Lieutenant's practice. I see his works as surface impressions that sit in relation to image reproduction, print making and its many skills and formats. Here the screen operates as a means to a single state, not in a photographic register but more in conversation with artefact and distortion. There are elements in the paintings that feel photographic due to the clever bitmapping gestures. I think back to the Wade Guyton show *OS*, 2012-13 at the Whitney Museum of American art and how the artist was able to agitate image and the photographic within painting. However in this show the glitch, artefact and distortion often occurring through the intentional physical constraints of the digital printer itself. The canvas would be fed through folded in half to print one face, then flipped and repeated. This would very often succeed through its failed registration of image. The visual language of the printer jam so often seen to be discarded, was celebrated. I feel the wave of artists such as Guyton, Urs Fischer, Seth Price and the school of 'post-internet' and its digital brushes. I feel it more as a sensibility and influence that has fed into the artist and shaped a return to the hand. These works are crisp and possess a language that sits in relationship to the mechanical reproduction of image however this is an illusionary approach.

The bitmapping is an interesting place to start in terms of the scope of these works. There is a visual language created through the overlaying, a sort of stacking of varying levels of bitmap. This is done through very controlled shifts in tone, the bitmap is overlaid with a gradient created in it. This technique is critical in understanding how Lieutenant is able to dial up and down in terms of light in relation to the language of printing and photographic image while also using the technique in contrast with more fluid mark making. It's a kind of mechanical reproduction that sits in against the gestures made in thin glazes. The visual language signifies the photograph and printing but in a subtle way that creates both a surface pattern and texture while also causing uncertainty in terms of where the printing starts and stops. The silk screens used to lay down this mesh of pattern are sometimes cleverly re-used in the series in a sort of serial gesture that ties the paintings together. This meshing of pattern or mapping of tone is laid down and pushed through in both positive and negative layers like colour field stamps. It sits on the surfaces like webs of tulle, it creates what the artist refers to as "multiple sheens of printing". It is not a *moiré* however it does operate in a similar optical field.

The work 'Into the Basement', 2022 stands out in a representational sense. This piece has grown out of, or has been rubbed onto by a previous series of works. It incorporates photographic documentation of a material surface from a previous piece. There is a hazy but recognisable photographic print of what is a polyester netting material, this surface was painted onto as a sort of textural ground, here we find it pushed back through the silk screen in a stacking of fabrics. I think this methodology comes out of a willingness to experiment, to continuously question process and material in relation to image and gesture. Lieutenant has been inspired by the *Blushes* and *Freischwimmer* series of German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans. These works are critical in terms of understanding the significance of the use of abstract photographic image in relation to material support. Lieutenant like Tillmans, spent his formative years playing around with the tone setting on photocopiers, dialling the contrast up and down and washing out images. The key to all this is the interest in the construction of the photographic image.

The balance in these works is what gives them a charge, a tension between the two registers. The fluidity, lightness and their diluted skins have more of a European sensibility. The painterly gestures here are all created through control and technique. There are no printer malfunctions or ink bleeds, what sometimes resembles traces of such malfunction are actually in the hand. Through his involvement in the installation of two different Sol LeWitt instructional wall drawings Lieutenant has been able to fine-tune a rag technique that has assisted in providing these surfaces with a softness, a delicate and light ghosting of pigment. There are passages where heavy impasto is dragged through the silk screen, wetness is critical in relation to this. Another series of gestures sit ever so lightly, spray bottle dilution, squeegee drags and droplets of pigment all dancing around in harmony. The treatment of light stands out to me in the way that colour seems to sit back and the medium and dilution, dabbing with rags all assist in building up tone ever so gradually with light touch. The deep and dark pigments are very much lightened so that the tension of fluid painted gesture and the screened mesh of tone sit in conversation. The three larger works in the show have an even greater sense of weightlessness. They feel perhaps more immediate and lighter on. I think much of the success of this painting is its lightness, a willingness to stop and let it be.

I see a little Helen Frankenthaler, Cady Noland, Christopher Wool all thrown in the mix, informing or inspiring but I also find the work very distinctive and refreshing. This show can be enjoyed as a material sense as paint on canvas but there is an intentional wabi that mirrors personal trauma. The marks and processes of creating help soften these bruises. I know the canvas is pushed flat with force while working, but I also feel it is held up to the world and that it takes in its surroundings. They are like rubbings of life and are also a way to filter positivity into material. The pieces are left a little open, incomplete but in a way that gives them a charge, a pulse of the world around. It makes you look, it poses questions and occasionally tricks our eyes. It is incomplete in the best way, floating out and falling apart. I think the energy is the same as that of the young artist in front of the photocopier, now Lieutenant has polished the process but still welcomes the error. The printer jams, the world jams and so do these paintings.

James Kerr, 2022