

Gradation

Works by Katrin Bremermann, Bella Easton, Nicole Phungrasamee Fein, Roland Hicks, Diogo Pimentão, Melanie Smith, Troika and Erika Winstone

Curated by Paul Carey-Kent

Some shows are full of drama and sharp clashes, whether in their narrative content or in their formal language. That may be all well and good, and makes an immediate impact... but there's a place for subtler transitions, for boundaries to blur, for one thing to become another by more gradual means. And just such a tendency can be seen, in various versions, in the eight practices represented in this show. One might be reminded of Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. Achilles gives the tortoise a head start of 100m. But when he gets to the 100m point, the tortoise has moved a little further. Achilles runs on to that point, but by then the tortoise has again moved on a small way. And so on... Achilles can never reach the tortoise. This conclusion may feel wrong – after all, it is a paradox – but it does demonstrate the potential power of small differences. That's the power which these eight artists bring to art, whether that is seen in how

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one tone or colour shades into another; how drawing transitions into sculpture or film; how the detail of mimicry can deceive; or how different registers can be intricately combined, whether the registers be printed impressions or types of meaning. Nor, as it happens, is *Gradation* short of paradoxes: what looks heavy may be light; a re-enactment may be original; many may be seen as one; one material may actually be another; categories or boundaries may break down. The artists' many gradations, then, add up to a show of some substance. If there is a little of the tortoise in such approaches, maybe it isn't a given after all that the grandstanding loud statements, sharp contrasts and shock tactics of so much recent art will ever catch up...

Perhaps **Nicole Phungrasamee Fein** presents the most obvious case of gradation, as adjoining and overlapping visual planes transition gradually into each other in her gently luminous works. She methodically applies watercolour, slowly building – or maybe it's more like weaving than architecture or conventional painting – translucences which dissolve into each other. No wonder she says 'slowing down is fundamental' to what she does. It isn't too surprising to learn that she has trained in China as well as in her native USA. Fein's titles are rigorously numeric, allowing the viewer to enter their tranquil, meditative zones without preconceptions, and opening up the possibility that the process of transition

is itself the subject. It's like watching a deconstruction of night falling, bringing to mind the place of distinctions in our language. When, for example, do we decide to say it is dark? That reminds us how what seem like binary distinctions soon collapse into degrees. Are we old yet? Are we happy? Is that art? Ah yes, this is definitely art.

Troika is a collaborative formed by the Germans Eva Rucki and Conny Freyer and Frenchman Sebastien Noel in 2003. The primary border they investigate is that between the digital and physical. *All Colours White* is exemplary in that respect: it consists of a mechanism which projects light onto a canvas structure over a 12 minute loop. Initially distinct, the colours gradually bleed into each other, creating an intricate spectrum until their collective amalgamation results in pure white light. Here the natural and digital collide: Troika explain that 'the specific combination of red, blue and green references the colours that mediate our digital experience, while the composite colour spectrum inherent in white light is intrinsically natural' so that *All Colours White* investigates 'that which coexists but cannot be experienced simultaneously'. It is typical of Troika that a scientifically-styled process leads to an alluring aesthetic experience – such as when 15,000 volts of electrical charge burn bronchial forms into wet paper or thousands of dice enacting computer programmes form coruscating patterns.

Bella Easton's practice is founded in drawing, typically homing in on domestic details such as the Victorian wallpaper which has inspired her works in *Gradation*. She develops, replicates and reflects on the source to generate a complex, intensely graded, account of the multiple relationships and contradictions between inside and outside, natural and artificial, open and enclosed, chaotic and orderly, uncanny and familiar. Her method is a hybrid of painting and printmaking: the squares we see in her extracts from *Angel Heart* are lithographic prints each pressed

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twice onto paper-thin ceramic, in slightly different registrations, around the central axis. The Rorschach-like result is a coming-together that may look like one complete view, but is actually a doubling of two halves. Easton first used ceramic in this way for the 96 panel *Angel Heart*, which

won the Jerwood London Original Print Fair prize in the Royal Academy Summer Show. Both ceramic works take their cue from a drawing, and Easton also shows another drawing – *Where Stars Dissolve* – alongside a rubbing rendered directly from the surface from which it developed.

Katrin Bremermann's abstractions operate on the scuffed edge of the minimal between painting as object, support and image; and between colour as surface effect and sculptural element. Her practice is rooted in drawing but – unusually – her forms edge literally as well as suggestively into space. That happens in three ways: coloured shapes escape the expected confines of the edges of their grounds, overlapping what seems set to constrain them; figure and ground are ambiguated to trigger shifting effects of relative advancement and recession; and the paper is worked – notably through the application of wax – so that it becomes a sculptural element. Bremermann first makes black lines and other marks on the paper, then applies a layer of wax which causes the relief and also makes the sheet semi-transparent, only then adding the final layer of paint on top. Add the working on both sides of the paper, and the combination of smooth surface with the marks and abrasions caused by her processes – which can include applying an iron – and the various gradations in her simple-looking organic shapes become stimulatingly hard to pin down.

Diogo Pimentão pushes further into the three dimensional potential of drawing, and gives it a performative as well as sculptural aspect. One expects a pencil to be used to make representations, but Diogo Pimentão is more interested in reflecting actions and movements – if he is representing anything, it is the work

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itself. That leads him into using paper and graphite to make forms which curve or fold into space. We might easily assume that the resulting sculptures are metal – given their density of surface and the way they reflect light, as well as traditional expectations of how such works will be constructed. That gives them a powerful physical presence, even as apparent strength and actual fragility are set in dialogue. *Documented (blind-side)*, given its installation on the wall, edges back a little way towards the expectations of paper. The title suggests a narrative of its formation, but also teases us a little: how hard is it to draw blind if no image is involved?

Roland Hicks first became known as a photorealist who explored the boundary between art and reality, often focussing on substantial depictions of small items. His more recent work results from finding that the idea of an art object interested him more than creating the illusion of pictorial space: now the material and its representation turn into each other. Gouache, paper and coloured pencil are refashioned to scrupulously reproduce

the texture of plywood and Oriented Strand Board (OSB), so that first we are deceived, and then surprised by such an investment of time and effort in what looks like junk. It's only at the level of finely graduated detail that we can tell what has been done. Get past that, though, and two other factors emerge: first, the pieces set up a version of minimalist but roughened geometry which relates nicely to established languages of abstraction; second, the titles suggest playful narratives: thus, *The Tree, The Axe* is either of those objects depending which side you can see – the blood red or the leaf green.

Erika Winstone makes use of moving and still images to capture the actions of people in both cinematic sources and her own life. The intensely layered installation *Hotel du Pre* projects a film – which itself incorporates silverpoint drawings derived

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from the actions we see – onto part of a glass panel engraved with what becomes a shadow image. It is conceived, in Winstone's words 'to allow the dynamics between the glass panel, reflections, shadows and video to continuously shift'. The film features a re-enactment 35 years later of scenes from Jacques Rivette's 1981 new wave film *Le Pont du Nord*, with Winstone and her daughter – Anna Dean – wandering round Paris. The 30 minute loop counterpoints Rivette's original (which is shown silent) with the re-enactment (with ambient sound). Given that Rivette's film itself stars mother-daughter actors – Bulle and Pascale Ogier – but the parts they play are of strangers who meet by chance, the ways in which the film can be read across to Winstone's own artistic and personal setting become dizzying. Film shades into reality, original into re-enactment, who we are into who we would like to be. Then comes the play between media...

Melanie Smith trained as a painter in Britain has long worked between London and Mexico City, during which time she developed a film-centred practice. She brought an outsider's observations to the many contradictions of her adopted country – typically blurring the documentary and aesthetic registers by examining how socio-economic factors translate into everyday colour and materials. *Maps, Mud and Mondo(s)*, from 2014, is a 14 minute black and white video collage of seen and heard elements. Preferring accumulative conjunctions to orthodox narrative, Smith foregrounds how the film has been made and edited to emphasise how the content moves between image as representation, and as surface effect. In Smith's words, the four registers of 'archaeological, paleontological, erotic and primal overlap one another in an elliptical manner, suggesting a different ontological order between bodies of different types'. That mapping of a world takes in ants, fish, birds, photographs, mouths, rocks, water, spiders, the night sky, artefacts, caterpillars, eyes, lovers, a phone... and the unifying mud – or human clay – of potentially creative hands scooping up gloop.

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