

The artist at work.

Once, I worked in the art department of the high school that Paul Caporn once attended, serving as a 'technician' engaged in various preparatory tasks – the stretching of canvases, the mixing of glazes - that would facilitate teenage creativity. Understandably proud of their graduate's post-secondary achievements, the head of department had hung, in a prominent and well lit spot, one of Caporn's formative paintings, a self portrait of the artist bent headed, pencil in hand, absorbed in some creative midnight activity. Whilst I understand that professional artists might wish to disassociate themselves from their amateur productions, this work kept springing to mind whilst I stared into some images of Caporn's more recent, relevant, work as it demonstrated a (possibly coincidental) continuity of theme and subject that surprised me. This early object – for a painting is, after all, an object – took as its focus a *process* of making, elevating a means to an aesthetic end.

Caporn's early painting is part of a tradition of artist's self-portraits in which the subject poses as if candidly caught in front of an easel, tools of the trade in hand - versions of this composition have been made by any number of giant painters both pre and post modernity: Gentileschi, Velázquez, Van Gogh, Matisse. These works could perhaps be an early manifestation of the 20th century obsession with visible and significant process in art, the self-conscious exposure in the finished object of the method and labour of making or the welcome intrusion of the workshop or the studio in the aesthetic experience. Whilst present-day Caporn's practice is somewhat removed from figurative painting – although it remains, in a sense, figurative - it continues its connected to this idea of visualising and aestheticising various production processes, fusing those connected with 'creativity' with those of construction.

Caporn's focus is often literally on 'tools of the trade', usually most familiar in the workshop of the handyman or on the industrial building site - the spirit level or the crane or the bulldozer - although not outside the scope of the contemporary artist's studio. The presence in Caporn's objects and 'incidents' of these materials is of slippery significance. Frozen and manipulated outside of function, tableaux of construction can become allegorical, whilst explorations of colour and texture or evocative formal juxtapositions invoke aesthetic and material dialogues associated with the more directly experiential minimal or abstract sculpture and painting. The works activate the signification of their source materials, whilst exploiting their material specificities: the base and support of an 'Industrial Bulk Container', embedded in the gallery wall is illuminated from within by a nebulous liquid light that references the unknown, potentially toxic chemicals usually transported within the functional object with an almost painterly formal tension between fluidity and structure, echoing Agnes Martin's flickering grids. Elsewhere, arrangements of iridescent spirit levels perform a similar activity, their inbuilt functionality evoking ideas of stability - and by association the potential for irregularity and collapse – in oscillating geometries of colour and line.

Tension is a visible force throughout Caporn's practice, between representation and abstraction, or between a sense of subtle menace and a playful absurdity. Construction, by necessity, generates both the product and the offcut, suggests a potential for destruction as well as production. A grapple excavator is pinned to the wall, imprisoned by the trunks of trees that it would otherwise ably manipulate. Whilst the composition of the object might potentially suggest the panic and anxiety of the inbuilt accident, the reduced scale – as though built for operation by a small child - and soft foam surface lend the situation a sense of strange humour, a sense of the child's understanding of the malleability of the world. Objects with understood use value, a specific function and purpose become semiotically unstuck, reanimated with the fresh potential of building blocks or the raw materials that they are intended to manipulate.

This sense of aesthetic and representational potential that Caporn identifies in his trade's tools has the transformative effect of not only transferring the discourses of art to the workshop rather than the object, but of also highlighting the operation of those discourses in the matter of day to day life. The ideas and experiences often contained inside the white cube or fixed within a frame can and should be applied to areas of production or construction or living once considered vernacular or prosaic. Manual labour may be mythologised by the image of the artist frozen at work, but the council worker laying down the double white also knows the power of a decisive line.

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