

EXHAUST: BLACK NOISE / TOXIC WASTE

The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none.  
The simulacrum is true.

– Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981)

In simulation theory, hierarchy between objects and humans is eroded. If nothing is real, then everything is equally real. Art – and specifically, the exhibition – can often start to feel like a simulation, where everything is turned into an image, a conduit for new meaning. In Oliver Payne's work, readymade objects have been removed from their functional use and turned into replicas, imitations, symbols – performing as stand-ins for something else.

Our perception of light becomes integral to this imaging, simulating process. As humans, our primary sense is sight: what we see we recognise to be true. Treating objects as conscious entities, Payne questions how, for instance, the camera might perceive the world through capturing a singular moment of light. Restaging a photo of the graffiti writer Teach's camera collection, Payne treats the cameras as more than just idle machines, imbuing them instead with subjecthood and agency. He is drawn to the romantic notion of these cameras coming along for the ride in Teach's backpack, documenting this illicit writing, wondering what memories might lie beyond the shutters. Similarly, a once-black piece of fabric exposed to the harsh light of the California desert displays its own faded history, with just a square of the original black visible that Payne covered with steel. Having planted the fabric on the same day as asking the gallery to plant a seed, these two elements – birthed on opposite sides of the world, completely indifferent to each other – have grown upwards and faded downwards at the same rate, a physical manifestation of what Payne calls the 'discharge' or 'exhaust' of light. Through their susceptibility to the sun, these two seemingly separate objects exist now in synergy, irrevocably bound together.

When mainstream computer graphics were rolled out during the 1990s, software engineers used chiaroscuro and curved lighting effects to illustrate the new technological capacities for 3D rendering. The image of a mirrored ball infinitely reflecting black and white tiles became an instantly recognisable representation of simulated reality. The image – physically recreated here as sculpture – calls to mind the sleek vision of futurity imagined in science fiction films such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *World on a Wire* (1973), an important touching stone for Payne in exploring the world as simulation. Like the central character, Fred Stiller, how might we recognise the unreality of our reality? In 360-degree panoramic landscapes, the spatial illusion is often interrupted by a missing piece of data, a black square glitch. This black box – with all that shape's connotations of memory and conspiracy – recalls the Yiddish origin *glitsh* of the word 'glitch', meaning a 'slippery place', somewhere between here and there. A series of lightboxes hung as canvases on the gallery wall display symbolically charged objects that Payne imagines might populate this glitch – from the American quarter that activates a whole set of worldly functions beyond currency, to the synthetically altered weed plant that opens up new chemical realms. The lightboxes themselves, evoking X-rays (another form of sensory imagery), create an unnerving depth perception where the object almost stands away from its hosting form.

Payne has disrupted the exhibition form by displaying the title on the wall towards the back of the gallery. Appearing as a concept object, illuminated from below, we are unsure how to experience it: is it a work? Is it looking at us looking at it? Instead, a simple bowl of pasta greets us, elevated to sculptural status upon a plinth. The Japanese Gundam robot franchise, a recurring emblem in Payne's work, has spawned a successful series of merchandise including a themed café in Tokyo which became something of a pilgrimage for the artist. Every dish on the menu is an effigy to a different robot, itself a simulation of the human form. Here, Payne has replicated this crude imitation, which conjures images of space age congealed food – a pasta meal from the future. If anything, it appears so real that it becomes absurd, performing itself each day in the cooking and subsequent renewal; the perfect illusion of perfection.

Text by Phoebe Cripps