

Farewell to This Land's Cheerless Marshes

A world of turmoil and doubt builds monuments to assure itself of its longevity; a world of triumph and certainty builds menageries to showcase its eclectic worldliness. Richard Stone does both simultaneously, as if he sees the timeless persistence of things and their disintegration as a continuum on which humanity cannot but live. The paintings and sculptures in *everywhen* continue Stone's conceptual mapping of landscape, while also investigating the limits of artistic boundaries.

Stone has always muddied the distinction between painting and sculpture, always pressing the one into the service of the other, rendering two distinct artforms twins, glimmering reflections of the possibilities of matter. And now with painting, he treads a line between abstraction and figuration so subtle that images leap where brushstrokes seem inert. The result is the remnants of a dazzling empire, crumbling and yet shimming through its own ruin: a lost past, a forgotten future, a timelessness wedged in the present.

A very great deal of scholarly energy can be devoted to the distinction between abstract and figurative painting, but none of it comes to much in *everwhen*. It might be supposed that figurative painting aims to give a picture of the world, even after the dissipation of the mimesis paradigm in which the sole ambition of art is to imitate reality. To paint something is to represent it anew, through the eyes of the artist, so that the figure is both part of the fabric of the world and the subject of art. Religious painting, for example, confers earthly certainty on the divine while opening and continuing an artistic discourse on how to represent the essential human concerns. Conversely, abstract painting may be thought to represent not things but feelings and ideas, wherein it is more concerned with the mechanics of paint and its dynamic possibility to express the strivings of the soul. Abstract expressionism and geometric abstraction at least have in common the will to eschew the figure and to explore the possibility of painting, but they diverge in their respective concerns with feelings and ideas. This coarse distinction has been prevalent for maybe one hundred years, but not without difficulty. The distinction begins to crumble with the likes of de Kooning, Auerbach and Kossoff, where the figure is present but abstracted, both a feeling and an idea, whilst also a thing of the world.

Now Stone has turned his hand to painting on a grand scale as if to challenge the tension between abstraction and figuration, causing it to collapse in a swirl of figures, representations, ideas and feelings, bolstered by sculptures that precisely reflect – and yet casually diverge from – the paintings. The first thing to emerge from these densely-layered networks of brushstrokes are vertical lines, evenly spaced and translucent, not dividing the canvas but defining it. These lines bring order to an apparent chaos by stating a theme that continues throughout *everywhen*, even mirrored in the legs of the plinths on which the sculptures stand. They mark the first divergence from abstraction, as they create subtle pockets of activity in which figures begin to emerge. In some works, we see ciphers of tropical birds and foliage, in others we might perceive traces of humanity. That which appears as abstraction gives way to figuration precisely because there is a hidden order.

The figures that seem to emerge may not even be there; like Stone's whitewashed and sanded landscapes, these works play on the uncertain relationship between the viewer's perception and the artist's intention. But there on the canvas, we certainly seem to see something, as if these paintings are a metaphor for seeing certainty where there is only contingency. Abstraction and figuration converge to allow the viewer to see faint glimmers of paradise.

Although consisting in abstractions with suggestions of figures, *everywhen* continues Stone's exploration of landscape. Thematically speaking, he continues to explore his preoccupation with the mythological image of England as a country defined by its landscape, but unlike the misty, romantic landscape of previous work, here we see an England emblazoned with colour. It resembles a nod to the outlying tropical lands that become the extension of the landscape on which a world is built across continents and cultures. And in a dramatic departure from Stone's usual landscapes, these new ones are bursting with life: within the apparent abstraction, the figures emerge, densely populating the canvas, bustling for space or attention. Here we find a tonic to the barren moors, heaths and fields of England that makes *everywhen* something of a menagerie of paintings. Nonetheless, there is the familiar mist of Stone's earlier works; here more subtle, patchy and in billows, but a mist all the same.

Stone has always referred to his work as 'the reversal of making': the figurines with their heads subsumed by bulbs of wax and the antique oil paintings with their surfaces sanded away and brushed with whitewash are acts of making something by a discrete process of

unmaking what is already there and which is already supposedly complete in and of itself. But this new body of paintings that constitute the bulk of *everywhen* seem to revert to pure making. However, traces of unmaking still pervade the canvases. The renewed act of making gathers in together the tradition of landscape painting, and then delicately unmakes it by filling it with apparent figures that almost, but not quite, dissolve into dizzying abstraction. Always so preoccupied with history as both the key to the present and a mythology of greatness lost, Stone now situates himself firmly within a painterly tradition that walks the tightrope of abstraction and figuration, both making and unmaking the landscape of England, of painting, of past and present.

The sculptures in *everywhen* echo the form of the paintings, with their undulating lines, their curves and a difficult tension between solidity and plasticity. Stone's unity of painting and sculpture reaches its climax with formal parity between very distinct materials and entirely indistinct ideas. If the paintings are menageries of tropical creatures in far-off landscapes, then the sculptures are monuments to a landscape that is the consistent substance of art. But these new monuments, unlike those before, are not heroic or quotidian with an absurdist touch, they are elegant follies that express a desire to persist through time entirely without purpose, luxuriating in a purposeless aesthetics. These sculptures sit parallel with the paintings; reflective, but always already other.

In the final analysis, Stone has moved forward aesthetically while remaining conceptually true to his roots: the landscape is the sole bearer of a peoples' history, knowing more than anyone could ever conceive, having seen it all and burying each new layer of history in its folds, waiting for an artist archaeologist to scratch or brush away the surface. And therein this contemporary body of work, which would have been impossible without the very modern notion of a fraught distinction between abstraction and figuration, is inextricably tied to an ongoing narrative. Stone finds himself, quite unavoidably it seems, entrenched in the art historical tradition of landscape, whether in painting or sculpture, whether made or unmade. To the monuments of a lost past, *everywhen* adds the menagerie of a forgotten future in which a sense of urgency, drowning in colour and replete with chimeras, sweeps the surface, as if restless to find its direction in a land without end.