



SEPTEMBER 26, 2019

SHOW PONY – TOM SLADDEN



13 SEPTEMBER - 5 OCTOBER 2019 / SPA_CE GALLERY, NAPIER / BY MICHAEL
HAWKSWORTH

At Napier's Spa_ce Gallery until the 5th of October, you can see the careful and somnolent oil paintings of Wellington-based artist, Tom Sladden. Produced by improvising on the original paint coats on old found doors circa 60's – 70's, each painting is constructed by combining cut sections of two hollow-core doors of contrasting colours to create between them an abutting horizon; often not really an actual horizon, but rather, a simple formal device, like a chord change in the image. The insistence on the materiality of the wooden panelling and yesterday's enamel colours makes the works reminiscent of children's simple wooden puzzles and so you get a vivid sense of childhood memory. A pictogram-like simplicity renders the scenes. Dinghies, horses, bunting are replaced by the residual silhouettes of themselves.

Old signage, or household effects are usually scuffed and dinged, and sometimes you'll see an attempt's been made to mix the colour to fix it up, and yes it was in the ball park, but no match. This language of patching is used by Sladden to subtly detail the large areas of colour. The patches hover like clouds or reflections or puddles or just what they are, sticking plasters of 'same' colour but now comfortable in their clumsy application, ok with their makeshift 'imperfection' now that they've found legitimacy in being a signifier expressive of memory and transience. The ambiguity of Sladden's colour use, the subtlety, and the seemingly accidental nature of their tonal variances and placement result in images that have a quiet dallying kind of introspection. The second to last stop before the gnomonic after-image becomes Arp or Mondrian-type abstraction.

Beyond the adoption of a language of wear, it's the real and palpable layer of age, that kitchen cupboard door patina, that gives these works much of their affect. Contemporary British electronic music outfit Boards of Canada subvert the futurism implicit in their media by creating music that sounds warped, muffled, crackly like a cassette left on a dashboard. They achieve it by leaning on analogue rather than digital technologies and obsessively sample the sounds and tones of vintage television. It's yearning, but there's also an anxiety in it; if the past is an amber haven we retreat to, it is one with darkened recesses. In this sense Sladden's approach to nostalgia is similar, but the results are more wistful and aesthetic. In paintings like *Holding*, *Matariki*, and *The National* there's a tendency to defer to a fussy compositional balancing, coupled with decorative tendencies that lean towards illustration and distract from the evocative potentials of the subjects.

Otaihanga Bait, *Matariki II*, and *Te Horo* are the high points of the show for me. Their off-kilter compositional arrangements, the particularities and peculiarities of their

subjects, the sense of boredom, the fluctuating light. I grew up on the Kapiti coast myself during the 70's and early eighties, and yes, places like Otaihanga were rambling and unkempt with few footpaths. Lawns were tightly bedded couch grass on aged dunes, lupin and blackberry on every horse pasture and untended section. Any decent-sized tree was probably a macrocarpa. It's nice to be so vividly reminded of those things, so minimally.

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