Magnets for the attention

Over the past decade, Nicholas Pankhurst has developed a process of casting and painting on polyester resin to produce wall-based and freestanding sculptures. He sees these works as 'encapsulation devices' for images and patterns, stories and ideas that stem from his own mind as well as from conversations across time with historical works of art. Pankhurst's use of colour, repeating geometric shapes and a fluid sense of movement, all rendered in an industrial material, are a nod to the exuberance and utopianism of modern art, in particular the radical experiments undertaken at the Bauhaus. This school of architecture, design and applied art, which existed from 1919 to 1933 in Germany, encouraged students to work with the industrial products of their era, such as concrete, plate glass and tubular steel. At the time newer substances, including plastics, were still relatively untested by artists, which meant that even at the highly innovative Bauhaus there was a sense of unpredictability and chance when it came to their possible applications in fine art. In his 1938 textbook, 'The New Vision', Bauhaus teacher László Moholy-Nagy reflected on the opportunity he missed to paint on thermoplastics: 'If I had not been afraid that these [...] were not permanent, I would never have painted on canvas again.'

Scepticism persists around the viability and merit – not to mention the morals – of plastic as a fine art material, but the truth is that it has been hiding in plain sight in a significant proportion of art made since the beginning of the 20th century: for example, in the celluloid of photography and film or in modern industrial and acrylic paints. However, more conspicuous use of plastic in art has been rare. For Pankhurst, this lacuna allows for a process of exploration within a versatile medium that reflects the awkward complexities of the world we live in, but which is still uncodified in art-making terms.

Pankhurst's technique of pouring multiple thin layers of pigmented resin to generate a stack of coloured backgrounds for imagery is a dance of control and chance, through which he can play with light and shadow, colour and tone. Onto each layer of resin, Pankhurst paints imagery and patterns, or pours further pools of resin. The final result is a hard crystalline block whose appearance retains fluid qualities, harbouring glowing mists of translucent colour, or slicking itself, opaque, into pits and channels the artist digs into the work's surface. This layering produces the final composition in an operation reminiscent of the traditional oil painting system of scumbling and glazing, in which successive washes of colour are added to an image to lighten or darken the overall effect.

In his latest body of work, jelly-like brights combine in patterns with gauzy swathes of colour and swift sketches depicting plants, faces and bodies. Different types of line appear in the work: some are soft and sketchy, others tight and resolved. With these painted sculptures a new process has arrived, which involves engraving dots and lines into the surface and filling them with opaque resin to create highly defined shapes.

In 'Static Mountain Face', a reclining nude delineated in saturated green is partially camouflaged against a stylised brushstroke of the same colour. These elements contrast with the landscape beyond: a busy pattern of striped flags arranged in peaks to evoke a mountain range. But look again, and the same nude on her green divan also forms the smile in a face completed by a pair of dazzled eyes erupting out of the rock.

'Static Mountain Face', 'u & i (spotty face)', 'Red Lorry Yellow Lorry (Blue Head)', 'Contentment and Repetition (Knight Light / Knights Head)', 'Rainbow Eclipse Head': nearly every work here seems to conceal a face. Some are latent, relying on the human tendency for pareidolia – seeking faces in otherwise random arrangements – while others are inescapable, such as the knight's head with its elegant moulded profile. Pankhurst, who sees a successful work as one that 'smiles back at you', has long sensed a kind of life animating things; a way in which 'small objects have a soul'.

This animism implies a particular ethical relationship between the artist and his work: for Pankhurst art is an extension of the artist's relationship with the world, so that 'how you think about other people and how they relate informs how you care for your work. They are like your children.' And, just as children play, Pankhurst's works seize any opportunity to come up with new games and rules to escape the strictures of convention. They might rephrase an art historical reference in a ludic style by dissecting Auguste Rodin's 'The Thinker' into head, hand and foot, and displaying each part on a brilliant column with the added bonus of a pipe to facilitate his ruminations. Or they might concoct a sequel to one of the most iconic paintings ever created, as with the tongue-in-cheek 'Sequential Sheens & Consecutive Grooves (sunflowers 2)', which recasts Vincent Van Gogh's familiar blooms as spiky red and green flowers resembling Venus flytraps. This playful dialogue pays homage, and situates the works in the company of illustrious precursors, but it also invites us to look again at paintings and sculptures so famous we have all but ceased to see them.

With their glossy surfaces and delicious colours, Pankhurst's painted sculptures are magnets for the attention. Once the resin has set, he takes great care in preparing them for the moment they meet our eyes, sanding down their surfaces to a mirror-like polish. The process evokes the historical ritual of applying the final coat of varnish to an oil painting in preparation for the vernissage, during which a work finally meets its audience. Only then, Pankhurst explains, are they 'ready for the modern world, ready to face the public.'

— Ellen Mara De Wachter, December 2021