

The Talbot Rice Gallery demands a certain museological spirit from exhibitors. Possibly as a result of such thinking, a single glass table in the middle of the space displayed some papers that related to Alan Michael's work on the walls, prompting an uneasy circularity of possible readings. This large show co-opted numerous visual modes, from Photorealism to some deceptively thorough explorations of British Pop art, over two floors of new paintings and silk-screened canvases. Seen together, they went some way to revealing the complex strategies at the heart of Michael's practice.

A Xerox of a still from *Armide* (1987) by Jean-Luc Godard was one of the items on the table. It was less about the film's being a response to Jean-Baptiste Lully's opera of the same name than about Godard's amalgamation of it with a story about French bodybuilders. Michael included a short text next to the image, which elucidated Godard's 'heterosexual ambivalence' towards his homosexual subject matter. Ambivalence, either towards the subject matter itself or in terms of a contradictory history of the subject, is what Michael brought to the methodical surfaces of his paintings and silk-screened images. Another cutting was a magazine page with the legend 'Feel like a woman, wear a dress', accredited to Diane von Furstenberg (creator of the wraparound dress). In an interview with the online Huffington Post this year Furstenberg described, somewhat gnomically, the paradox at the heart of what makes something a classic: 'fashion is mysterious, as a rule. You just hit on something that happens to be timeless and right.' This surface offhandedness or perhaps studied diffidence is something Michael used to draw his references level.

Dragging a 'classic' through history can result in all kinds of incredible combinations. From the swinging original to the rather more sober and safety-conscious update the Mini has undergone numerous restylings. One anecdote, for example, recalls the bizarre design process that landed the original car with giant door pockets; apparently they were based on the dimensions of the favoured gin of the car's designer, Alexander Issigonis. (As Peter Cook imagined during *Further Ejaculations from Derek and Clive* in 1977, 'This officer says to me, your motor's weaving all over the road! I said, what do you expect – I'm pissed out of my head.') Several of Michael's colour text-based paintings, including *Pink and White* (2008) and *Blue and White* (2008), used the word 'Mini' as a repeat pattern. The classicism of the original 1960s' font was at odds with the cheeky BMW update of the design that appeared in a hyper-real painting of two parked cars in *Cars and Houses* (2008).

Contradictory themes were scrupulously pitted against one another in the arrangement of this show. There were so many canvases, demonstrating so many approaches, that their arrangement provided moments of conceptual disclosure as well as concerns of a more formal nature. Some of the most gleefully jarring were the screen-printed works that alternated with the Mini-related canvases on the gallery walls. These works, *High Life* (2008) and *Touched Void* (2008) being typical examples, inevitably recalled the work of Robert Rauschenberg, in that they used the silk screen's potential to make repeated images from photographs in monochromatic colours, although the palette for each was limited to co-ordinated 'colourways' and used images of architectural metal structures as repetitive elements. This hotel-room neutrality forced the viewer to dig deep for a point of reference.

The show's odd mixture of 'square' and culturally aware was an effective strategy, by turns disarming and insinuating; it reminded me of American talk-show host Dick Cavett. In one great episode in 1970 Cavett was in friendly joust mode with Marshall McLuhan; both seemed to be playing up their status as cultural observers as they discussed the medium that was transmitting them: television. McLuhan, encouraged by Cavett's faux innocence, concluded by saying, 'the image pours right off the tube into the nerves. It's an inner trip.' For good measure he added, 'the TV viewer is stoned'. A similar mangling of counterculture with the mainstream is what imbues Michael's work with its queasy flitting between dapper 'suit' and imagined suburban lowbrow.

This was a show of works that gently but firmly rebuffed your advances. It was necessary to remind yourself that the Positiva house music label, while having made some good recordings and being the instigation for Michael's ongoing series of paintings on the subject (including *It's Positive*, from 2008, included here along with some smaller collaged paper versions of the logo on the aforementioned glass table), was also responsible for

Reel 2 Real's inexplicable song 'I Like to Move It' (1994). This was another potential chink in the armour of cool source material. But, as with numerous other references, the glass table revealed Michael knew this already. Printed on a sheet of paper were a description and a discography of Positiva. Michael cunningly allows this kind of information to creep in to disrupt and confuse the semantic implacability of his works, steering them away from stylistic pastiche into a curious avenue of their own.

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