

MATT HALE: Recent Work

There is a small piece among Matt's current work – it might be an experiment, an incomplete fragment, or part of a larger ensemble – which seems to condense and encapsulate much of his current preoccupation with landscape. It looks like a piece of petrified bark, varnished up for sale in a seaside visitors' fossil shop, containing what might be the serrated curves of ammonite fragments. In fact, the wood has been branded with the red-hot teeth of industrial cogs, and glossed with tinted PVA.

There are pieces that incorporate fallen logs with glue-painted Perspex inserted into slots; large specimen 'slides' which press transformed plant material – while giant glass 'test tubes' of greenish detergent are bored through the trunk, emerging as grease-smear plastic rainwater pipes.

There is a sense here of the romanticism of landscape painting, and its idealisation of nature, gone badly wrong. And yet, the place in which they were made – Matt's hut, in the damaged bucolic setting of a wrecked landscape garden – contains evidence of its colourful, if mutated, life. The room is strewn with body parts, a literal nature morte from dead plantlife, which, together with the detritus of man-made material, all given a jolt of creative electricity in Matt's laboratory, evoke disturbing and oddly joyful hybrids.

Being familiar with Matt's work over many years, it's a real pleasure to recognise how his long gestating ideas, played out in materials like sump oil and Perspex, in activities such as pouring, drilling, splitting, burning and in media such as painting, video and installation, have come together so coherently in this recent work. And great too, to see the containers from his intervention in our architectural project Venus – detergent-filled tubes as a 'stained' glass window and a 'revealed drain' with a glass panel to watch household wastes swirling out – recycled here with new subversive force.

It's so interesting how the finding of a particular studio space can galvanise an artist. In Matt's case, a typical day begins by collecting water from a spring, and gathering logs for the old wood-burning stove. He opens the graffiti-sprayed iron shutters to the view of the sunken pond and the ivy-clogged trees. One thinks of Ivon Hitchens, starting each day by stepping outside to wash his face in the contents of the previous night's hot water bottle, before going 'humbly to nature' – as he put it – 'to "see" what later I will try to paint'.

There is the sense that, just as when Philip Guston hung a lightbulb in his new cinderblock studio in Woodstock in 1967, it illuminated the ladders, nails and old junk that filled his late works, Matt's location has brought his work into focus. There is a conscious limiting of the palette to materials from the immediate environment. There is almost a mood here too of late Guston – some of the work makes you smile, but it is undercut by melancholy.

Yet the limited palette is subject to an invigorating variety of processes. Matt makes a mushroom sandwich of rotting fungus pressed in a vice between two sheets of watercolour paper. It prints with its own spore-ink, a black stain of itself, and bleeds through the paper a second, incredibly delicate, semblance, like a transparent jellyfish. (Dieter Roth is smiling somewhere, nodding in approval of this fungal Rorschach experiment).

There is, in a corner, a lightbox that consists of plant material squashed with oil and grease and glue, like a specimen slide, between which the silhouette of a cut-in-half kitchen sink looms. Industrial scrap, a 'readymade' sawn like lumber, assembled with loose precision into something – dare one say it? – rather beautiful.

Large leaves comprise other readymades. (As Matt prepares for his two person show at Kunstverein projektraum-bahnhof25.de, Kleve it's natural to think of Joseph Beuys' own readymades). Matt's 'leaves' are transformed by layers of paint and PVA, and thrown casually on the floor like a sheaf of vinyl flooring off-cuts, poisoned by oil perhaps, like contaminated wildlife. Nearby, a

cherry branch has tarmac pressed into its bark scars, like dirt in a wound.

And how Matt makes the work is instructive too, because these are readily made, with the process obvious and apparent, in a straightforward workmanlike manner – neither slick nor ramshackle.

Inevitably this is the kind of work to which we bring our own preoccupations and associations, and this is what Matt's art, quite un-dogmatically, encourages us to do. There are clues here that might imply that when man re-arranges and changes landscape, then problems occur. There's a sense of loss. If Palmer's romanticism (Matt once made a Samuel Palmer moon out of grease) didn't show the hardship of rural life, if man's transformation of landscape (both rural and urban) is as natural as nest building or anthill construction, if we can mourn decay and at the same time aestheticise it, and if we understand climate change and still burn the forests, then there are clues in Matt's work that suggest looking at all this a little harder.

Stephen Chance
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Stephen Chance is an architect. Matt Hale's revealed drain is an integral piece of 'Venus', a studio-house in London by Chance de Silva.