

Precious Things

Exhibition catalogue

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PRECIOUS THINGS: A SELECTION OF CONTEMPORARY PAINTING represents an important emerging tendency in contemporary art. For the artists in this exhibition, painting isn't simply an activity – it is a discourse. *Precious Things* is a celebration of that discourse (the communication of thought through image and object), sustained by reflection, application, knowledge and insight.

Referred to as post-conceptual painting, the work presented here acknowledges the legacy of conceptual art in a similar way that painting embraced cubism a century ago. This is an important issue. Too often the relationship between painting and conceptual art is wrongly presented as polarised or irreconcilable, but the approach here doesn't dictate stylistic orthodoxy; on the contrary, it is characterised by diversity and pluralism. Contemporary art isn't the same thing as modern art, which is an industry that services celebrity, capital and the mainstream media. This is painting informed by modernism – though it doesn't always look 'modern' – painting which is aware of post-modernism but which eschews irony and replaces cynicism with scepticism. Most of the work in this exhibition displays a sense of the vernacular. The concerns and influences are as varied as the artists and, like so much contemporary painting, it is characterised by reclamation. *Precious Things* presents painting that is generous, intelligent, thoughtful, exquisite, painful, celebratory and fascinating. This is not art which seeks approval but art which demands the audience's reflection and attention. As Donald Parsnips (a.k.a. Adam Dant) once said, "Take it or leave".

Contemporary painting doesn't always appear as unorthodox as its modernist precursor once did. Neither is it as promiscuous as post-modernism. Nowadays, expressionism is considered cathartic and minimalism retentive – convenient categorisations which aren't always the case. The problem with these orthodoxies is that the prescriptive tends to become the academic. *Precious Things* is a tendency, not an academy.

The artists involvement in their work is intense; intensely precise, intensely painful, intensely thoughtful and sometimes intensely funny. This is also the kind of painting that doesn't always use paint. Over the last ten years, at one time or another, work by all the artists in this exhibition has given me cause to think. They've also given me pleasure. Curating this exhibition has been an opportunity to share that pleasure. I want to thank the artists for their generosity in making and lending Highlanes Gallery these Precious Things.

Graham Crowley, 2008