

Given that everything ostensibly ought to mean something, though, this suspension might be valuable in its own right: it proposes that the justification for something's existence might be its very absence of justification. Hold that thought, and move on to Wade Guyton's 'paintings', from 2006, of inexact squadrons of giant black Xs made by pulling canvas through an inkjet printer, garnering a smeary painterly aesthetic from imprecision. Guyton's heavy graphics on fields of white, an instant trademark of sorts, are at once assertive and empty, shrinking as you look at them. A machine did this, so what? It looks like painting, so what? Guyton is obviously aware of Christopher Wool and endgame strategies in general but he's carrying on, implying that if you persist after the end, it's not the end. Valuable, arguably, is the purposefulness of the drive towards a sense of incompleteness, lack, embodied disappointment; what's supposed to be admirable, paradoxically, is the fact that you don't find it admirable.

The sense, in such work, of art being a kind of strategic manoeuvring in a really confined space is redoubled by Black's *Pleaser*, 2009. A rumpled sheet of thin transparent plastic, suspended vertically from the ceiling, is daubed on one side with a yellow array of materials: Cif cleaning fluid, moisturiser, nail varnish, soap. Some of this stuff is secreted into little cling-film pockets so that it will never dry, inscribing Black's artwork as perpetually mid-process, responsive not only to currents of air but also to the vagaries of encounter. The title, meanwhile, coupled with the use of materials intended to ensure an attractive surface – and, furthermore, added to the work's visual similarity to abstract painting – suggests deep ambivalence about delivering standardised satisfaction to an audience. The narrow space one occupies when engaging with Black's work, then, is between the tickle and the slap; and also between the meaningful (this is a work about surface) and the meaningless (this simply is a surface). Things signify, or things are just dumbly what they are, with given properties.

Calderwood's videos and sculpture straddle a comparable line. In the video *Ground Experiment #1*, 1998, he meticulously positions four wine glasses between what look like thick slabs of concrete, distributing the weight perfectly, then jumps on top of them: tentatively at first, but with increasing force as the glasses don't break. And you admire the brainless pluck of those glasses – and the everyday miracles of physics – until they do shatter. And then you feel at once childishly satisfied and oddly sympathetic and reaching for human-condition metaphors, which is quite a lot to get out of glassware. Cambridge, you'll remember, has been home to a bit of philosophical thinking in the past, and this feels like a very city-specific show: placed together, these artworks threaten to broach massive, knotty questions. Shirley Tse's wall-mounted sculpture *Algorithm Broken by a Bullet*, 2007, drapes golden iridescent plastic, cleanly shredded into overlapping strips, over a tubular aluminium chassis. It looks vaguely loom-like, though again it's the kind of thing that immediately frustrates someone who knows they have got to describe it. There's a back story, connected to how

technological innovations have tended to be developed first by the military: the plastic here is one example of that, and so is computing, which emerged from programmable looms. That's interesting enough, but what's more involving about Tse's work, here, is the question it raises as to what extent such content is in the work: how far materials can actually carry meaning.

The experience of viewing *Algorithm* is of shuttling – dithering really – between what plastic might be a shorthand for (the archetypal 20th- and 21st-century material, an engine of progress etc) and what plastic is, as demonstrated by this sculpture: an extraordinarily malleable texture in the world, made by us, and also just plain atomic matter, stuff to look at. We let art be a conveyor of ideas, but it's a messy one, underwritten by ancillary texts and anecdotes and guesswork. What hitches Tse's work to Black's and Guyton's – and to pieces like Ian Kiaer's *Endless House Project: Wittgenstein/Cambridge*, 2009, a tumbling corner installation of damaged propped mirrors, scraps of fabric, a casual scatter of miniature mirrored cubes, and more – is its functional tentativeness with regard to narration. You can cook up stories about why Kiaer's bits and pieces are together, and see that the artist has cued you, with overlapping textures and shapes, to glimpse some haphazard sense in it. But since any story might be as good as any other, what's more fundamentally conveyed is a request that you stop making sense for a while. Again, in a parallel process of logic to that which inhabits Guyton's paintings, the resistance to justification might become in itself a form of justification. Yet 'Material Intelligence' is a cumulative experience, a snowballing challenge, and its stretching succession of rebuffs to wholehearted decoding gathers momentum in the eyes and mind. Yes, I walked out feeling obscurely petulant, that the art had somehow won and I had lost; but aware, too, that I don't feel that way enough. ■

MARTIN HERBERT is a writer and critic based in Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

■ Talk Show

ICA London 6 to 31 May

'We need to talk.' Of all the utterances in the ICA's 'Talk Show' exhibition (it appears at least twice), none rings truer or sums up the problems and complexities of speech more succinctly. The phrase is often a shorthand for relationship problems, of calling things off, but also encompasses a sense of urgency, of need, of desire. Curated by Will Holder – best known for experimental art writing journal *FR David* – with the ICA's Richard Birkett and Jennifer Thatcher, 'Talk Show' addressed this desire in a month-long season encompassing performances, exhibitions, events and a new publication *Roland* (named after ICA founder, Roland Penrose), appraising the voice and expressions of language made through it or in reference to it.

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weeds. Sometimes the corporate 'look' of this group seems less like a reflection of a wider feeling than the inevitable product of trying to imagine the future – for isn't such a speculation about youth bound to involve some forward-looking? And don't most prophetic perspectives inevitably incline towards the dark and catastrophic? Nevertheless, it feels right.

The curators sense that this generation will make no formal leaps forward in their art. Matt Keegan's *Hands Across America Again*, 2008, revives the 1986 charity project Hands Across America. This time the mayors of various cities offered to have their hands cast, and Keegan presents them on a table in a creepy arrangement of stretching fingers with an accompanying tableau recalling the crisis mood of 1986. Such work points beyond the gallery, but in no more radical fashion than the art of the 1960s and 70s. Despite some distracting examples, painting looks unlikely to revive under this generation, nor does photography with any kind of documentary objective: Mohamed Bourouissa's *Périphérique* series, 2005-07, reports on life in the French *banlieues*, yet it evokes theatre or collage rather than the truth-claims of earlier documentary. Similarly, Elad Lassry's manipulations of found images make fun with the stagings of advertising photography, stripping away the texts and leaving us with eerie, too-glossy, highly coloured images (and at around 37x29cm, they are refreshingly smaller than the kind of art photography that has come to dominate the market recently). They share the same interest in post-production as other photo-based works in the show: Tauba Auerbach's *Crease I*, 2009, resembles a poster that has been crumpled and then straightened out, though approach it more closely and it dissolves into a field of undulating dots. And, similarly, Josh Smith's *Large Collage (New Museum)*, 2009, shows that if painting is to have a life in this generation, it may have to take up residence next to tools of reproduction: he splices expressionism with collage, uniting painterly effects with snatches of found posters, newsprint and effects drawn from wood-block prints.

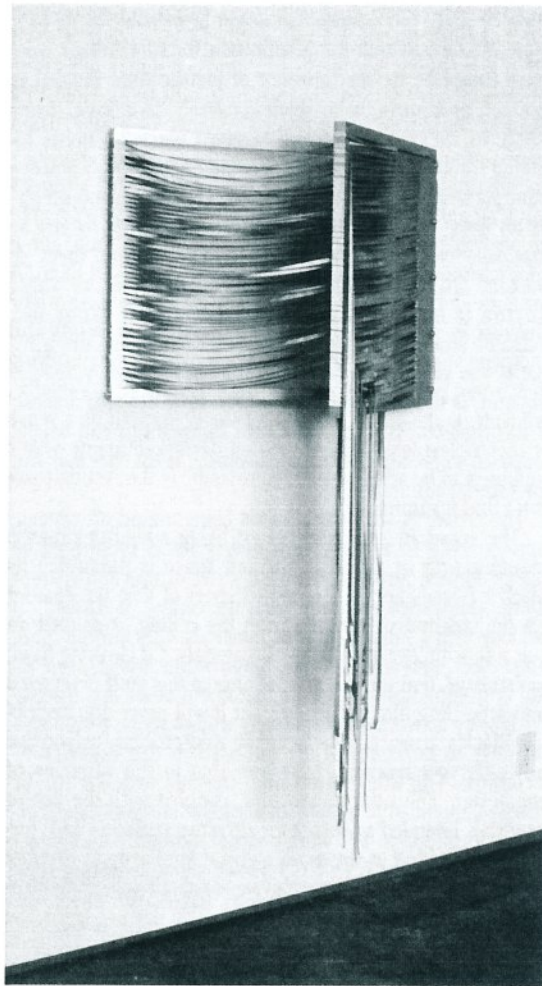
If one starts with objections to the enterprise, one can finish up with few complaints about 'Younger than Jesus'. Not only because it seems quarrelsome to cavil about such speculative shows but also because the true judgement on such efforts can only come with time. ■

MORGAN FALCONER is a journalist.

■ Material Intelligence

Kettle's Yard Cambridge 16 May to 12 July

Language – in the sense of speech and writing – enjoys such primacy on this planet that it is sometimes hard to remember that it is only one way of communicating. And not necessarily the most precise one, either. That's one of the governing propositions of 'Material Intelligence', whose eight artists interact with what, pre-Modernism, would be considered 'non-art' materials: from face cream (Karla Black) to suspended plastic bottles (Tony Feher) to the contents of



Shirley Tse
Turn Your Headlights
On Please 2007

Kettle's Yard's storage space (Matt Calderwood). The idea is that, among these artists, language is somehow both insufficient and surplus to requirements; that our encounter with the worldly resources that the practitioners use proceeds primarily from the material's inbuilt connotations and haptic qualities. So, what have you got to say about that?

Nothing, ideally: and a first pass through Kettle's Yard was accordingly unnerving. The mind bounced touchily off the work, internal monologue stuttering. What was I going to write about Claire Barclay's compact yet unruly sculptural array, *Stillstill*, 2009? Fall back on description, that it corrals together a steel shelf with some dinky machined metal cylinders and a piece of straw arranged on it, a propped sheet of glass smeared with mirroring paint, a few dangling pieces of black fabric? The arrangement looks at once casual and precise, full of familiarity – these are things from the world – but also uncertainty, for who knows why they have been convened like this. Function, while suggested, isn't clarified: one dumbly observes metal and vegetation, feeling something of the gulf between their physical properties, perhaps unable to go further than that.

CARLOS GARAIKOA at Yorkshire Sculpture Park

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