

LOOK AT THIS

Whenever I enter another artist's studio I'm always aware of the courage it has witnessed. It's a particular kind of bravery that allows a person to confront their own subjectivity in the world and remain with it long enough for something to emerge. Studios carry the residue of this confrontation. The air is thick with the familiar scent of endeavour, paint, thinners, canvas and linen each with its own distinct odour. These materials hold traces of excitement and doubt in equal measure. They also carry the quieter curiosities that keep an artist returning to the studio long after the romance of making fades and the work becomes something more searching.

There's often a moment in another artist's studio when the environment reveals itself as a kind of thinking apparatus. Objects accumulate, surfaces hold fragments of decisions, and the room begins to function as an extension of the mind that occupies it. Marks, tools and materials gather into a loose architecture of thought. The studio becomes less a place where work simply happens and more a structure through which thinking takes material form.

Max Wade's studio shares this atmosphere of concentrated curiosity. During a recent visit, the space was filled with paintings and sculptures made for his exhibition *Ancestors* at Sid Motion Gallery in London. Paintings leaned against the walls and shelves while newly assembled objects occupied the floor with a quiet confidence. It was here, surrounded by the work, that Wade spoke about the emergence of sculpture in his practice. At one point he mentioned that he had trained as a classical pianist and had always felt a certain envy toward fellow musicians who could improvise freely

at the piano. It struck me as a revealing admission, not least because the paintings themselves seem to operate with precisely that sense of improvisational openness, an attunement to the shifting frequencies of colour, mark and movement.

Music plays a significant role in Wade's studio. He often works while listening to particular musicians, allowing their structures and rhythms to drift through the room as he paints. He mentioned listening frequently to John Coltrane, whose restless searching through sound mirrors something in the way Wade moves through a painting. Coltrane's later work, where melody stretches beyond its conventional limits into something more exploratory and spiritual, resonates with the sense of open investigation Wade sustains in his practice.

Listening to Wade describe this atmosphere, it became clear that the paintings share something with musical structures. They move through incident and variation, never quite settling, always testing another rhythm or possibility. At times the paintings feel almost scored, their marks distributed across the surface like phrases or passages. At other moments they open out into something closer to improvisation, a process of discovery unfolding in real time. This sense of searching becomes evident when looking closely at the paintings themselves. There's a curious dynamic between the large and small works. *Rising Water* is an imposing painting, yet soft in character. Vertical slabs of pink give way to a web of greens, yellows and blues, all held together by searching lines drawn into the wet surface with charcoal and paint. It's brave work. The painting dismantles expectation and certainty in favour of an emergent way of seeing, a form that grows within the ecosystem of the painting itself. Look again and two forms of energy appear to rise through the composition: dancing totems of green, yellow and blue creating a space between them that feels at once expansive and compressed.

Wade's paintings invite this kind of coalescing vision. In the smaller painting *Snookered*, looking becomes something closer to a game of untethered strategy, a response to what happens when colours land in unexpected places. In *Soap Boiler* we encounter a paradoxical relationship between lightness and density. The hues feel buoyant and luminous, yet the paint itself is dense, robust and playful. This sense of openness has been present in Wade's paintings since I first encountered them five years ago. They are profoundly self-effacing works. Rather than announcing themselves – *look at me* – they seem instead to circle back and say *look at this*. Their curiosity refuses closure. They resist the comfort of painterly tropes and stylistic certainty, keeping the work alive to the next possibility.

In this respect Wade shares something with the British painter Roy Oxlade, whose work carries a similarly inquisitive relationship to image-making. Oxlade's paintings are full of wit, humility and philosophical curiosity, often holding humour and seriousness within the same gesture. Wade spoke about the importance of Oxlade's attitude toward painting – the sense that painting can remain open, playful and questioning without sacrificing depth. That spirit of enquiry runs throughout Wade's practice. The paintings refuse to collapse into fixed meaning;

instead they sustain a space in which looking itself becomes the central activity.

Set amongst the paintings in the studio are a number of new sculptures constructed from objects reclaimed from Wade's surroundings and built up with sacking and plaster. These forms feel assembled by hands that understand looking as a physical process. There is something in their directness that recalls the material immediacy of Cy Twombly, where gesture and object inhabit the same field of thought. The sculptures have a clarity of presence that differs from the rich, shifting surfaces of the paintings. They sit firmly in the world – not apart from the paintings, but alongside them, as if playing another instrument in the same ensemble. Where the paintings fracture and open space, the sculptures offer weight and pause. Their colour has edges; their forms carry a quiet gravity.

The same paradox present in the paintings – lightness held within density – appears again here. The weight and texture of wood, plaster, stone and metal are balanced with a surprising delicacy. These objects seem less constructed than discovered, their forms arriving through a process of attentive handling rather than pre-determined design. Seeing the paintings and sculptures together forces the eye and body to make connections. It is playful, but also deeply human. There is a hint of melancholy there – not sadness exactly, but a kind of recognition born from compassionate attention and quiet humour. They are funny works, though not jokey ones. The humour is closer to the smile that appears when we recognise our own fragility.

This sensibility runs through the paintings themselves, which dart constantly between edge and centre, opacity and transparency, line and form, verticality and horizontality, object and space. The paintings feel alive with possibilities. At one moment I think I'm looking at fruit hanging from a tree; at another a still life, a landscape, or even something resembling a cornucopia of Rubenesque flesh and feasting. The temptation to anthropomorphise or mythologise these images is strong, but it's also something of a red herring. The paintings quietly refuse such demands. Instead they seem to say: look at this – this red, this orange, this green. Look at the depth of their character. Look at how movement travels across the surface: up and down, left and right, corner to corner. Meaning never quite settles. In the end the paintings remind us that interpretation is only one small part of the encounter. Before meaning there is attention, and before narrative there is sensation. The works ask us to remain with that experience a little longer than we might normally allow. For a moment we are simply here together – artist, viewer, colour and object – listening, looking, and jamming.

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