

Ed Bats

But today it's different.

16 Nov – 9 Dec 2023

Ed Bats presents a new suite of paintings incorporating collage elements alongside the familiar hard-edged abstraction and patched surfaces of his recent works. The exhibition title borrows from a line that appears in the first prose poem of William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All*. A little book bound in blue paper, *Spring and All* was first published in 1923 and dedicated to Williams' friend, the painter Charles Demuth.¹ At a time when many sought renewal after the destruction of the First World War and the uncertainty and fear that followed it, Williams' book announced a vision for the arts that threw off the cultural artefacts of past, and directly addressed the present moment's imagination.

Williams began by stating his purpose: to find the present moment and to fasten the mind of the poet and reader there ('in a fraternal embrace').² The poems shift between verse and prose, often speaking to themselves and modulating phrases grasping for invention and newness. Williams' challenge to himself and the reader is to penetrate the 'vaporious fringe which distracts the attention from its agonised approaches to the moment'.³

From the beginning he is clear about the difficulty of this task and describes the 'constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here'.⁴ For Williams, this ocean is populated by 'crude symbolism' and hierarchies of simile that insist on the comparison of external objects with subjective experience ('such as an anger with lightning, a flower with love'). These are 'empty' conventions that must be destroyed to return the imagination to a primal chaos.⁵ In *Spring and All*, the necessary destruction of tradition leaves everyone vulnerable and none more so than the artist ('he is easy of attack').⁶ But Williams' preposition, is the acceptance that such risk is necessary in order to find that, 'today it is different'.⁷

¹ William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2011); also see J Hillis Miller, 'Williams' Spring and All and the Progress of Poetry', *Daedalus*, 99, 2, 1970.

² Williams, *Spring and All*, p 4.

³ Williams, *Spring and All*, p 3.

⁴ Williams, *Spring and All*, p 1.

⁵ Williams, *Spring and All*, p 22.

⁶ Williams, *Spring and All*, p 42.

⁷ Williams, *Spring and All*, p 2.

Bats' paintings appear particularly interested in the spirit of Williams' 'metaphysical deconstruction, if not his specific message and its context. Exactly one hundred years later, that seems appropriate. After all, critical discussions regarding the importance of symbolism are certain to sound different today.

Yet, in Bats' works there is a recognisable ambivalence to stark metaphors and romance. Strong vertical lines and architectural forms order the works and orient the viewer towards the rationality of a built environment. However, these structural features appear fractured or covered by the gestures of a city that continues to rearrange its dimensions. Aspects of the original intentions remain visible, though they are obscured by layers of plaster that has been worn or peeled back. The unrealised or outmoded objects that populate Bats' canvas are Williams' 'pieces of the city'. For Williams, these fragments are found 'flying apart at his approaches'.⁸ In Bats' collection of paintings, organising principles are obscured behind a thick shimmering veil or folded into themselves.

The collage elements in the works produce more intimate moments. For instance, in *Seaview Hospitality* the outlines of a house plant shimmer behind opaque and overlapping panes of corrugated plastic. In *Early Days*, a window framed within the canvas contains two asymmetrical apertures into a room populated by walls shifting within their intended axis. The tones of these two images within the paintings contrast. But like the contrails superimposed over cold waves in *Cover Boy*, they suggest movement and energy beneath Bats' fluctuating surfaces.

Bats draws his source material from mid-century film photography. The soft colour and high-contrast images recall discontinued lifestyle magazines and the Kodachrome images that portrayed the experiences of previous generations. However, his use of collage is not nostalgic but forward looking. Like the disrupted features of Bats' urban scenes, the ephemera are distorted by time.

In some cases, the images are stretched and magnified to the point that the four-colour letter press prints create new textural planes within the works. In a series of paintings including *The Purple One*, *The Ashy One* and *The Swamp One* the amplification of the original image over two distinct tower-like shapes imposes a quiet static over the cityscape. These augmentations within the canvas introduce distinctive and modulating patterns that disrupt the impersonal geometrical logic in the works. In *Slow mo tango* the asymmetrical forms are placed at the bottom of the canvas and partially obscured by the

⁸ Williams, *Spring and All*, p 41.

erection of two monoliths. While the ephemera remain visible, their original purpose is unclear, and their character appears foreign underneath the rationality of modern built structures.

Like the unfinished walls in Bats' scenes, the images superimposed on the canvas introduce a disjointed sense of time into the works. They serve as memories of futures once thought possible, but while not coming to pass they continue to virtually influence the popular imagination. In other words, they are what Jacques Derrida described in 1991 as 'a hauntology', or a virtuality that continues to act without ever existing.⁹ For Derrida, the phrase sought a departure ontology, or the 'thinking of being' following the collapse of the Soviet Union when leftist politics sought to reconcile its future with its past. However, *hauntology* took on further meaning the following decade, when (mostly) British critics observed trends in pop music and culture towards the recycling of twentieth century aesthetics and sonic styles.

Critics such as Mark Fisher pointed to the failures of electronic music to live up to the futuristic promise of Kraftwerk in the 1970s or the dynamism of Rave, Jungle and Garage during the 1990s.¹⁰ By the early 2000s, futuristic music 'ceased to refer to a future we expected to be different; it had become an established style'.¹¹ For Fisher, the formal nostalgia of the period reflected a culture both saturated and exhausted. Pop groups such as the Arctic Monkeys were also singled out for their apathetic reproduction of 1980s aesthetics and sound in the 2005 single 'I Bet You Look Good on the Dance Floor'. Fisher put the problem this way, 'If the Arctic Monkeys weren't positioned as a "retro" group, it is partially because, by 2005, there was no "now" with which to contrast their retrospection'.¹² What was lost in the postmodern retro performances of anachronism was 'not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate'.¹³

Confronting this cultural impasse were other artists such as Burial and Ghost Box records who sought to capture the sense of exhaustion that came with 'the slow cancellation of the future'.¹⁴ Fisher described Burial's self-titled 2006 debut album as 'like walking into the abandoned spaces once carnivalised by Raves and finding them returned to depopulated

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p 10; also see Mark Fisher, 'Lost Futures', *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology + Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2022), pp 9-10.

¹⁰ Fisher, 'Lost Futures', pp 9-10.

¹¹ Fisher, 'Lost Futures', p 9.

¹² Fisher, 'Lost Futures', p 10.

¹³ Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?' *Film Quarterly*, 66, 1 (Fall 2012), p 16.

¹⁴ Fisher, 'Lost Futures', p 8.

dereliction. Muted air horns flare like the ghosts of Raves past... Audio hallucinations transform the city's rhythms into inorganic beings, more dejected than malign'.¹⁵

Bats has also cited Scottish duo Boards of Canada as an influence in his practice. Their early-2000s releases such as *Music Has a Right to the Children* melded ambient beats with eerie fragments sampled from obscure media. For example, in the title track of EP *In a Beautiful Place Out in the Country* an audio clip of Branch Davidian member Amo Bishop Roden is taken from an obscure 1996 TV special on cults and the occult. The sample provides an eerie refrain describing the natural and peaceable life enjoyed by the community at the Mt Carmel Centre, near Waco Texas, where a large number of the community died in a fire during an FBI siege of the compound in 1993. In an earlier interview, Boards of Canada described such tracks as 'inhabiting an alternative, parallel present where maybe someone in the past took a different branch to the way things actually went'.¹⁶

For Fisher, what this kind of hauntological music mourned was the disappearance of the virtual trajectories of 'popular modernism', or the potential for modernist techniques to be 'collectively reworked and extended'.¹⁷ In *But today it's different*, Bats' paintings share this same sense of melancholy; and like Williams, they take experience and imagination as the subject in his works. The gaps and windows in the layered landscape position the viewer as a passerby, or as spectator of the original forms that have faded or been obscured. The spectral images occupy virtual spaces within the canvas as reminders of the ways in which our memory has been materialised by technology. They suggest there is creative potential in learning to live with our ghosts, though we may not understand them. It is through the recognition of their virtuality that we can imagine different futures.

- Ryan Anderson, November 2023

¹⁵ Mark Fisher, 'London After the Rave: Burial', *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology + Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2022), pp 98-99

¹⁶ "Boards of the Underground", interview with Boards of Canada by Richard Southern, *Jockey Slut*, 3, 11, December 2000.

¹⁷Fisher, 'Lost Futures', pp 22-23.