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Jackson Slattery

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Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces
Jackson Slattery
The stain and the shadow

“Painting from nature is not copying the object, it is realizing sensations”
-Paul Cézanne

Jackson Slattery paints not nature, but images. His chosen subject-matter are photographs which now, thanks to the coincidence of digital photography and the web, can be disseminated across the world in their millions. From this constantly updated digital archive Slattery selects the images for his paintings, turning most frequently to the amateur photography database, Flicker, a site which allows users to post their own personal snapshots for view and comment. Once the photograph has been selected, Slattery begins his labour of reproduction. Slattery can spend days, sometimes weeks, at this job, carefully and obsessively replicating the seemingly innocuous photographs into small, intimate water-colour paintings. The works are then presented alone, or, as in his recent show at Sutton Gallery’s Project Space, hung together in loose disjointed groupings of three or four images.

Looking at this grouping of paintings, it is often hard to discern any logic to the disparate images he presented as documenting a common (but implausible) narrative—a night on the town with basket-ball player Dennis Rodman. Slattery encourages viewers to imagine the images. In his Sutton show, Slattery encouraged viewers to imagine the disparate images he presented as documenting a common (but implausible) narrative—a night on the town with basket-ball player Dennis Rodman. This double-movement—the simultaneous erasure and creation of life in the image—is tied to the process of reproduction in Slattery’s work. In the infinitely reproducible world of the digital image, Slattery seems to say, a trace of life can always be found, even if it must be painted in. Slattery may have learned this lesson from the great master of the art of reproduction, Andy Warhol. In his own copies of photographs, Warhol used the unpredictable medium of the screen print. In doing so he realised not exact copies, but a series of prints each marked with their own unique sequence of marks and stains. The message of the screen-print is that while the reproducibility of the image may drive us to desire the same, the task of reproduction will always leave a stain: the telling sign of the human hand.

In Slattery’s small, sensitive paintings, the stain of the human hand is inescapable—for indeed water-colour is itself a stain. In each reproduced photograph, Slattery’s controlled mastery of the watery medium softens the stultified shapes and hard lines of the digital images with a shuddering warmth, forever marking the copies with the means of their reproduction. But more than these warm contours, Slattery’s careful application of paint to paper, coats the figures depicted in a penumbra of shadowy transparency. In the end, Slattery’s act of painting does more than merely copy the image—it also brings out the shadowy forms that lie latent in it. Slattery’s paintings recapture a flickering movement that the digital images he uses wish to immobilize and deny, presenting what writer Paul Carter calls the dark lines of ‘living shadows’ that constitute and occupy our world.

Slattery’s reproductions offer more than a copy—they portray the shadowy forms of a world in motion, and betray the stain of the hand that gives life to the image.