

Between Before and After **Martin Herbert**

Justin Hibbs: *Alias_Re_Covered* | 26 June – 12 September 2015

The most clairvoyant sci-fi of the last century recognised that our electronic future would be chaotic, patched together, corrupted: that computers would have meltdowns and shiny surfaces corrode. Not many modernists planned for this, though. Rather, they proposed machines for living that turned out to be sharp-cornered, air-conditioned nightmares. We're past that now: we accept freeware's faultiness through gritted teeth, recognise system crashes as unavoidable, if undesirable. But we're only halfway to somewhere else – where glitches and breakdowns, however much they colour our lives, might be construed as an opportunity, a materialist unpredictability zone of triggered mutations in which its captives might, cool heads prevailing, even take a strange kind of pleasure. Right now, we don't do this much. Exceptions are found primarily in music, where, since the 1990s, laptop artists from Markus Popp to Christian Fennesz to Carsten Nicolai and those who have built on their achievements have employed an aesthetics of the flaw: digital skipping, pops and crackles as sonic architecting. And occasionally, as here, in visual art, where the question is posed: what might an artistic practice look like that not only accepted glitching and mechanical errors but considered them as generative and applied them to painting, sculpture and the liminal points between?

Start with the exhibition title *Alias_Re_Covered*. This is approximately what a computer will call a file, or a copy of it, after a crash – such, indeed, was Justin Hibbs's own experience – a nomenclature that exiles the original to the digital distance. It's gone, and we're left with a replica, apt for an exhibition in which we arrive at midpoint, artworks spawned and reformatted, sampled, dubbed and versioned from absent others; an exhibition that keeps unfolding, reshaping, as if a creative virus ran through it. One through-line, though, is constituted by Hibbs's paintings, produced using a pinstriping tool, a sort of mini-roller that lays paint like a road-marker, which on the rough surface of the linen canvases introduces delicate visual hiccups. If what results – here and elsewhere – is rooted in the transcendent promise of geometric abstraction, any claim to purity is lost. Hibbs's works are worldly, imperfect at the outset, and not autonomous. Interdependence begins with the window drawing that schematises the gallery space in two dimensions before one sees it in three, and this kind of vertiginous back-and-forth movement doesn't let up. Midway, the show breaks down into diagramming itself, miniaturising and maquetting its contents and, again, shifting between two-dimensional and projective space. The stairwell, too, becomes a hall of mirrors, a visual echo chamber, and three-dimensional sculptures advertise themselves as emerging from two dimensions, like scaled-up origami. The paintings, in a mix of punchy black and grisaille, are at once flat and suggestive of illusionistic, layered depths. Everything swings between the digital and the analogue. Oscillation is the rule.

Now, all of this has ramifications for intrinsic meaning. The sculptural works, in the cuts and folds of their facture, create voids: the very process makes for negative space, without which there'd be no form. (One is reminded of the Japanese concept of *Ma*, in which intervals between things are considered equal with the things themselves.) Scaling up from this, the show as a whole seemingly relates to instantiation and void with regard to content. Hibbs's art orbits a set of thematics: the simultaneity of present and past (partly occasioned, of course, by the ever-expanding archive of the Internet); the related

impossibility of a single vantage point, with the past being shaped by the present and vice versa; the also-related possibility of reinventing the legacies of modernism through contemporary tropes of mutation and reproduction. Yet, as we can see, those latter issues are also operant on the macro scale in Hibbs's exhibition layout. The individual, self-secure work, that paragon of the modern, is still there, but it keeps seeping into others. Travelling through Hibbs's species of spaces, passing between dimensions that echo, self-sample and glitch, one might grasp that the whole, overarching the individual works and what they refer to, is a situation, a system, a cybernetic totality, always something else that one might click through to. Everything here is relational, pinned to variation partly through creative action, partly through tools.

The result is a model of art making, and particularly exhibition making, that when inhabited so that the individual artworks cohere into one pulsating larger one, feels simultaneously inventive and a little frightening, since it's tied to proliferation, not closure. Hibbs is staging this; but he's also staging production as restlessly ramifying, self-replicating, not necessarily with a goal in sight. If we grasp for a totalised reading, this might outline a cognitive reality in which we've moved away from the teleological, everything's-getting-better forever promises of the modern into uncharted territory. We're not there yet. Maybe we won't get there, maybe we're looping.

And if so, here's another loop: that this is also production related to the exigencies of production, albeit still with the potential to speak of something larger. Let's be clear – and in being clear, reiterate that production is nodal, networked, and a perpetually unfinished project, things nudging each other, domino effects transpiring. The real-world analogue of this is that in an artist's studio, it's always a transitional moment: the detached artwork as standalone statement is a falsity, a piece of theatre. In reality, one thing leads to another, all kinds of ambient forces shaping what's made – music, old art, a new tool. Rather than sweep such forces under the rug, Hibbs leverages them. Consider the relationship between his works and the sound work produced for this exhibition, a blend of analogue synthesiser and (self-)sampling by musician Ben Lancaster. In a classic feedback loop, the latter responded to Hibbs's art and then Hibbs, working further, in turn, responded to Lancaster's music. Influence can be hidden or exposed, just like the fact that artistic production is always, to some extent, artistic reproduction: building on the last thing you did.

This could be classed as something to angst about, or treated in a spirit of acceptance, ideally contagious. Make lemonade. Sulk when your CD skips, or turn it into music; lament the interrupted flow of your pinstriping tool, or make an aesthetic of it; dream of being an autonomous fount of creativity, or accept that all art is at least partly collaborative (even a collaboration with technology, or the person you were yesterday). Try for perfect surfaces or, like a raku potter, embrace the accidental; chase the one perfect work, or accept that art is a process without end. There is, it should be clear, philosophy here, on whatever scale you like: philosophy eminently suitable to a world in which, contra the moderns, technological progress didn't lead to a perfect social reality, or even necessarily one in which human agency has the upper hand. Sooner or later the glitch is coming. Use it. Or let it use itself.