

frieze

Thomas Helbig

China Art Objects Gallery

There is a moment in Thomas Helbig's exhibition 'Use Your Relatives' that I can't stop thinking about. A large oil painting comprises two pale pink egg shapes on a dirty white ground. The forms touch – kiss – at one edge; as we approach, the mess around them clarifies into a constellation of distinct, deliberate marks. In its lower left corner, a caterpillar-sized lozenge of paint, straight from the tube, has rolled from the point where it was applied and come to rest against the bottom edge of the frame, leaving sticky lemon-yellow tracks across the surface of the painting. Where it began, another squeeze of paint has been applied, making the trail double-headed and seemingly offering an inversion of the work's downward gravitational pull.

The work is titled *Awake* (all works 2010), and it is the best in the exhibition. Helbig is an artist who demands that we examine his work closely and quietly, rewarding us accordingly. At first it can seem that there is little to look at. In China Art Objects Gallery's new, lofty spaces, his modestly-sized paintings with their cautious excursions into colour sometimes seemed to struggle against the brush-marks and textures of the white walls on which the were hung. However, each work is a vault of information that requires us to sort through the diverse categories of incident contained therein.

In *Awake*, for example, many layers – and timescales – of painterly activity are evident on the same surface. Certain marks call faintly from beneath the painting's white background, others sit in raised crusts on top. The pink ovoid forms are sullied by heavy black underpainting, and the work's frame (fixed directly to the wooden board) seems to have been painted last, at certain points spilling onto the picture plane. Hair-like scintillas of paint are flicked across the surface. Blobs of unmixed colour sit like glossy little turds over slow, scumbled clouds of minutely differentiated tones. One extrusion of black paint has been subsequently dry-

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brushed with white. Once you enter this incrementally subtle micro-world, each event becomes distinctly exciting.

The paintings encourage the sense that they have somehow accrued of their own accord, a fantasy that is shattered when one comes across an element that is clearly deliberate and manmade, such as the small z-shaped symbol that is inscribed like a tattoo onto many of the works in this exhibition. The icon has diverse associations, from the scar on Harry Potter's forehead and Zorro's sword-sweep to the lightning-bolt insignia of the Nazi Stormtroopers. Here, its ominous quality derives from its obscurity, like occult graffiti.

Other works also seem to be defaced or abandoned. A series of small works on paper titled 'Use Your Relatives' all take defacement literally: found reproductions of other artists' drawings (a portrait and two female nudes) have had their faces partially obscured, in one instance by cruel, inky fingerprints stopping up the eyes, nose, mouth and ear. In many other paintings – indeed, the majority of works here – he has taken other people's art works (predominantly portraits) and used them as the bases for his fevered, obliterating marks. Sometimes, as with *Kind*, part of the face can still be seen through a gap in the thin white fog that encroaches on all sides. In *Wagner's Auge (Wagner's Eye)*, despite the original canvas having been turned to face the wall, a single eye persists in staring back at us.

Helbig is a German artist. Would it be entirely crass to extrapolate from his nationality a particular experience of history, of the weight of things hidden or submerged, stained or obscured? Probably. Nevertheless, even in abstract works such as *Awake*, his technique seems to illustrate, over and over, the insistence of the past in impressing itself upon the present moment. Perhaps the crassness is not ours but the artist's; in comparison with the subtle, formal extrapolation of these themes through some of Helbig's paintings, an image of Richard Wagner's beady eye hovering on the back of a canvas seems almost gauche in its directness.

In the show's final room, a small painting, *The Queen*, is hung high up in one corner. It is not just the work's placement that recalls Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1913); its surface is glossy black, which, from a distance, resembles charred wood but, up close, turns out to be a woven raffia picture drenched in paint. Here, a charity shop tchotchke is masquerading as a ruined icon of Suprematism; why then does it still retain the aura of a totemic object? In

Pharao, the only sculpture in the exhibition, a wooden cobra hisses out from a carved cloak, presumably once belonging to a statue of a saint or some such. As ever with Helbig's work, the outer skin fails to contain what lies beneath.

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