

'Co-operative Society.'

Exhibition dates: 8 July – 3 September

Preview: Thursday 7 July 6:00 – 8:00pm

Mathew Weir

"All virtue is social" Philip Larkin

Mathew Weir's paintings, as he notes, "reflect contemporary issues, and examine racial and sexual stereotypes by utilising historic sources." Each work, created on an intimate scale that demands our close engagement, is densely freighted with references from diverse and unlikely source material. Weir's most recent paintings are based around single figures or pairings, either set in blank backgrounds or bucolic landscapes. Encountering Weir's work for the first time, our immediate impression is likely to combine delight and fascination with a distinct discomfort. The artist creates extraordinarily strange and complexity fictional scenario. And while his high-keyed, sonorous palette draws us into these scenarios, we are also gently repelled by its excessive intensity.

The artist's protagonists initially seem to be clowns, musicians, 'commedia dell'arte' figures, or characters from the novel 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'. Wearing stage costumes and/or make-up, they convey a carnivalesque atmosphere which is giddily exhilarating. Like clowns, the figures can appear comic and threatening in equal measure. These characters are often based upon Georgian and Victorian ceramic figurines from museum collections. Weir's deft brushwork allows his figures to be seemingly made of flesh and fabric whilst also resembling porcelain. Their reflective surfaces glisten, but also seem metallic or flame-like. These contradictory connotations mean the characters appear at once peculiarly lifeless (like the inanimate statues that are their starting point) and endlessly animated.

Moreover, the protagonists' mask-like visages suggest that the artist has sublimated their energy into their environments or costumes, which by contrast appear bristling with life. This is vividly illustrated in 'The Entertainers', seen here, where Weir's extraordinary gift for creating illusory textures are given full reign. The characters' hair and costumes glisten, shifting from colour to colour between reflection and shadow, like shot silk or fire. Along with the peculiar way the characters' limbs become truncated or abstracted, we get the impression their bodies are unstable like molten lava or liquid rubber, morphing into other forms. The artist's uniformly flattened and smooth paint surface amplifies this sensation, keeping our eye continually mobile around the canvas surface, gliding from detail to detail.

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On close inspection it becomes clear that the artist's obsessively labour-intensive technique is a means to several ends. Weir creates a judicious balance in each work, and across his body of work, between a naturalistic intimacy and a hallucinatory realism. Often we encounter an overwhelming and claustrophobic level of detail, akin to that of Richard Dadd – one recent work has the title 'Dadd's Hole'. Yet elsewhere, landscape backgrounds are treated with an exceptional delicacy and sensitivity, offering us an expansive sense of recessive space. As in Dutch allegorical painting, every detail is included for its' symbolic potency and ability to contribute to a particular atmosphere. Indeed 'Dadd's Hole' features a burgeoning floral foreground based precisely upon such a Dutch painting. As in such still lives, flowers seem to act as both 'vanitas' motifs reminding us of our worldly transience, and as symbols of voluptuous sexuality.

In 'The Entertainers', our immediate attention is focused upon the relationship between the two figures, which seems fraught and impossible to decode. In several other recent works Weir expands upon similar motifs – both 'Embrace' and 'Coulrophobia' reveal black adult males holding white girls, set in idyllic woodland glades. In 'The Entertainers', counterintuitively, it is the cherubic, doll-like girl who confronts our gaze. Excessively confident for her apparent age, the girl's serenely impassive expression contrasts with the Dionysiac upward gaze of the elder male. His wild delirious rolling eyes resemble those of St. Theresa in ecstasy and St. Sebastian, adding a sense of tragedy to his comic costume. The artist's use of violent colour across the scene builds an atmosphere both tense and intense – of what Weir calls "psychological overload". In particular, the man's hair, lips and costume are so excessively hot-hued and saturated, even for a clown's costume, to elicit a sense of foreboding.

Weir's pictures function through an accumulation of ambiguous but loaded details. The girl's hair for example, melts into the man's costume, eerily. Her arm is wrapped around the man's back, in what should be a familial embrace, but the duo scarcely seem related. Rather, we are drawn between wholesome and more sinister sensations and implied narratives. Weir's use of exaggerated, stereotypical racial features and skin tones in 'The Entertainers' parallel those of his source material, of course. But working with such potent imagery requires an exceptionally sure-footed judgment of the artist. Successfully marrying the fictional and the realistic, the historical and

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the contemporary, is a tightrope walk. On the one hand, the artist avoids the sense that his figures are simply at a safe historical distance or are representations rather than individuals. On the other hand, the artist avoids rendering a particular position explicit. Each scenario is made to be so vividly real that we perceive how the present is suffused with the past. As the artist has noted, the problem his work alights upon is a wider one: even though we are aware of historical shifts in values, how can we hope to measure our own values and consciousness? In drawing upon different forms of representations and eliding them with both grace and guile, Weir asks us to remember the contingency of our own ideals, and the limits of how we represent the world. In recreating objects from our own officially sanctioned and shared 'heritage' – ones which now appear not only anachronistic but antagonistic to contemporary values, Weir offers us no liminal position outside of "the fascination with the other". The representations of the world that we own and share are irretrievably social.