

'Co-operative Society.'

Exhibition dates: 8 July – 3 September

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

Rory Macbeth

"The only thing that can redeem mankind now is co-operation."

Bertrand Russell

Rory Macbeth presents a diverse body of work resulting from the inherent tensions thrown up by the idea of ideal societies and utopian visions. The dual common denominators in Macbeth's oeuvre are, as he notes, "the constant fight between the ideal and the real" and "the idea of surface creating or being some sort of illusion." In both cases, the artist's use of heterodox media respond to Western tradition of pursuing the perfect, eternal or immortal, and the inherent absurdity of such an enterprise. In Macbeth's tragi-comic approach to such concerns, all values are contingent: "the great and lofty get tripped up by the mundane and trivial – and my works shift from one camp to another in a constant loop." Combining the serious and the bathetic, the philosophical with the absurd, the artist's output is "a never-ending burlesque of pratfalls".

Macbeth's work can be seen to relate to utopian ideas in their broadest sense, rather than to literal representations of utopia. One body of work seen in 'Co-operative Society', based around the process of 'customising' found objects – specifically a series of burnt-out cars and bikes - illustrates such ideas most readily. Discovered by the artist in the less genteel corners of our towns and cities, the artist meticulously resprays or chromes every single component of the vehicles. He also uses the exact colours of the original, only extends the colour to the entire objects so that they become bizarrely aestheticised whilst remaining functionless. As the entire vehicle becomes contained within layers of pigment, the works become glowing blue, black or chrome icons devoid of use-value. Transforming symbols of urban blight into unexpected objects of beauty is a familiar enough strategy. However, Macbeth replaces the objects back into the position he originally found them, so that the works become temporary 'gifts' back to the city, encountered unwittingly by passers by.

A less sculptural approach continues these preoccupations into sound, in another recent body of work. Macbeth recorded a series of idyllic songs in styles current before their existence, to create alternative 'cover versions'. The songs lyrical content sits uneasily with the stories of their original performers' tragic lives. The artist's new interpretations double the ironies. The songs become ridiculous, painful and funny at

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the same time. Macbeth rerecorded The Beach Boys' 'Wouldn't It Be Nice' as early ska; Judy Garland's 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow' is a Victorian music-hall operetta; John Lennon's 'Imagine' is performed by a 1960s-style Motown girl group. It takes us a few minutes to unravel the dissonances between styles, subjects, and temporal registers. The result is that the songs become increasingly moving over time, rather than merely ironic or anachronistic.

Taking sets of antagonistic or incommensurable values, and generating an unholy alliance between them is a strategy that the artist has pursued elsewhere. The work illustrated here, for example, 'Thought Bubble, (oh god, (Nietzsche's Mum, (joke)))' is an examination of incompatible terms. 'Thought Bubble...' attempts to make concrete what can necessarily only be conceptual. The work gives shape to the most abstract idea: thought itself. As the artist notes, it "cack-handedly reveals the invisible". Characteristically, Macbeth employs a 'low' form to undertake a philosophical investigation. 'Thought Bubble' also encapsulates two other intangibles. One is how to represent God, an intractable problem in art history. The other, Macbeth notes, is that the work also came out of how one might make concrete the idea of a joke. The contrast between the artist's inexpressive means and his conceptual / philosophical ends recalls Bruce Nauman's 'The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths'. Like Nauman, Macbeth dismantles our desires for a 'transcendental' aesthetic experience. By establishing his work as a comedy of errors, Macbeth disarms us, prior to revealing his true seriousness of intent.

A fourth series of recent works involves more traditional 'craft' skills. Indeed it is based on the unlikely practice of photo-realist painting. The artist purchased some 260 second-hand framed pictures from junk shops and charity shops – mass-produced prints on canvastextured card. These, though 'junk', approximate to what Macbeth calls "a romantic ideal of what 'good painting' should be". With extraordinarily dexterity, he created images of sticking plasters directly over the pictures. These resemble the 'real' objects in every respect: texture and colour, shape and illusionistic relief.

The artist describes the works as "the embodiment of traditional painting": they create illusions, albeit perverse ones. Rather than being 'trompe l'oeil', the artist defeats the object of his own technique. Ordinarily, as he notes, "a realistic painting never creates a real illusion: it always falls short so you can marvel at the skill of the artist

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and how 'realistic' the rendering is." Macbeth's project "takes this ideal to its logical extreme – the 'complete' illusion deceives the eye so completely it ceases to be an illusion." Accordingly, we only see 'real' sticking plasters. As Macbeth remarks, the paintings intentionally fail. They "render themselves mundane rather than extraordinary." Our process of interpretation is "a constantly frustrated loop which can never attain a point of conclusion". Such a phrase might well describe each aspect of his diverse, unpredictable body of work.