the rarefied feeling that it once might. Everything is coloured – and sometimes given relative urgency – by the neue scene.

At MIF/Marie-Laure Fleisch, Panos Tajgaris doesn’t try to ignore current events, staging an oscillation between them and, surprisingly, the so-called ‘Great Work’ of alchemy, in wall-based works that offer a sort of mystical symmetry in black and gold leaf. In one series, ‘Golden Newspapers’, 2016, the US-based Greek artist uses gold to block all columns of newspaper front pages made from images relating to the refugee crisis. The canvases surrounding these lands towards the crescopercular, essaying a downtown Rauschenbergian aesthetic in which silkscreened fragments – block blacks, bits of what could be letterforms, starbusts – cohere into graphic abstractions overlaid with gold geometries and suns. They have mood to spare, but Tajgaris is aiming higher than that. His dream, the handout suggests, is ‘the reawakening of individual and collective conscience, accompanied by a growing inner spirituality which allows us to comprehend with greater consciousness the reality that surounds us’. The chart in me says that Tajgaris’s ‘conscious’ might extend to confusing the newspaper works’ similarity to pieces by Marne Hugonnet from a decade ago, but maybe it’s just a crazy coincidence.

2016 was the Chinese Year of the Monkey, which lasted until 7 February 2017, which in turn means that Emanuel Lay’s five-artist group show Year of the Monkey caught the monkey’s tail. A year of likely notoriety to future historians is here already being historicised, though it is hard to say exactly how. Alongside Lena Herke’s untitled, unsexy 2011 sculpture, which looks like a saddle was wrappedlonely in something and then cast in dirty tinta acrylic, and the rustic pseudo-Fred Sandback effects of Benjamin Hine’s tautlengths of coconut rope, the most devastating works presented nothing much happening, amusingly. Matthias Hoggar’s not yet titled gouaches, all 2016, offer Neue Sachlichkeit style views of millennia at closed quarters, ears plugged with earbuds, data sticks held like cigarettes, laptop keys lying around, plus evidence of health consciousness: miner’s-water bottles, smoothies, toothpaste tube poked from a jeans pocket. While there is enough of a strong generational recasting, they feel footed from the inside, as if Hoggar were admitting that the cliches are true. And Juliette Blightman’s drawings and gouaches from 2016, numbered by the day (e.g. Day 1, Day 2, Day 32), tumble together bits of domestic clutter as if constant attention to the minor, and the homestead, were now a means of necessary self-care. Such, then, is the force of history as it is made. In the Year of the Monkey and after, optimism redirects to everything outside it’s frame: the boundary issues, the world as prison, the protests.

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London Round-up
Firth Street Gallery - Tintype - Barbican - Handel Street Projects

Jaki Irvine’s Firth Street exhibition, ‘If the Ground Should Open’, exhibited eight chunky video monitors mounted on large metallic boxes, each monitor accompanied by dedicated speakers, these compact units being scattered throughout the gallery space. The wall displays related documents. Partly based on her 2013 novel Days of Surrender, concerning the hundred or so politically active women involved in Ireland’s Easter Rising of 1916, Irvine’s installation presents 11 songs she has written to commemorate these women who, as the accompanying information reports, were ‘consigned to the margins as the [historical] narrative was masculinised’. This ultimately bloody insurrection against the invasive British government was quickly suppressed, and only retrospectively regarded as a key moment in the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922. The sound of the songs fills the gallery, the screens showing close-ups, all in black and white, of individual instruments in motion, their players or the singers, the press release noting the generosity of all those involved in what is in effect a complex collaborative enterprise. The women themselves, using an oral scoring system designed for Scottish Highland pipes, employ female revolutionary’s names as the scores ‘ground’, thereby musically restoring their involvement in the uprising. This emphasis on generosity and self-sacrifice is heightened by the inclusion of extracts from taped conversations between two bankers at the Anglo-Irish bank during the 2008 financial crisis. The model of music as collaboration seems confusingly contradicted by each screen’s presentation of only a single element of the whole, though perhaps this ‘dialogical’ distribution of elements is intended to focus attention on the required responsibility of individuals at times of crisis or political discord.

‘Aiming or Hitting’, Marion Coutts’ exhibition at Tintype, is a collection of disparate pieces employing photography, drawing and found materials. Although the press release mentions that this is the artist’s first exhibition for eight years, it is difficult to see why such a gap in Coutts’s CV should carry any positive weight. It is rather hard to make out what the exhibition is concerned with, save in a vague and unassertive sense. Around a substantial section of the space runs a black-and-white striped curtain, draped horizontally, as if also embodying a loose wall length ‘barrier’ of overlapping vertical stripes. This division into black and white banding is a too-obvious metaphor, if such it is meant to be; of life and death, good and evil, before and after. We know from Coutts’s 2014 memoir The Iceberg about the early death, in 2011, of her husband, the artist and critic Tom Lubbock, and perhaps a sign of this is embedded in her work. But, if so, one would hope for a more imaginative translation of this distressing circumstance to manifest itself in the work on show.

A small gouache on paper bearing the words ‘actual size’ seems merely mannered, ‘justified’, as it much else here, by little except its superficial closeness to Conceptual Art. The large photographic work Library, 2017, showing several shelves with their books alight, suggesting the removal of many volumes, again tiredly points to presence and absence. The two black, shaped paintings forming The Middle Distance, 2007, are arguably more engaging than much else in this unfortunately disappointing collection.

Richard Mosse’s ‘Incoming’, in the Barbican’s Curve, is dominated by a vast three-screen projection of the same title from 2016, made utilising a novel, heat-based, telephoto camera capable of detecting a human body at a distance of over 50m. Mosse has worked with cinematographer Trevor Tweeten and composer Ben Frost to produce this anthology of distress and displacement. The resulting 52-minute projection is assembled from numerous shots of the overpopulated confines of several vast encampments of present-day migrants fleeing to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa. On the screen, human bodies, objects and landscapes are rendered in an eerily ghostlike fashion, a result of the camera’s operational hypersensitivity to heat. We are also shown numerous people in peril and despair as they cross choppy waters in overloaded boats or, at calmer moments, moving about in vast refugee camps oddly reminiscent of (and sometimes actually inside) sports arenas. There are scenes of fighting, destructive burning, military patrols, individuals speaking on mobiles or running through pathways lined with fences and tents. Occasionally the two outer screens dim down and the action at the centre is highlighted, framed by a deep darkness. Employing surveillance-related technology in this way, counter to its intended usage, reveals terrible circumstances while also awkwardly aestheticising them, making them fascinating in a problematic way, something which the ambient soundtrack does little to disrupt. Incoming is an incredibly powerful work but, with as much overtly political art, the drift into shock-horror spectacle is difficult to detachable or contain.

At Handel Street Projects the wall is painted a seductive blue-grey in order to showcase Mark Fairington’s quartet of large-scale flower paintings collectively entitled The Worn in the Bush, a phrase borrowed from Ronald Peatall’s 1969 book of that name, documenting the varied roles of Victorian sexuality. Each vase of flowers – there are roses, lilies and peonies among the types displayed – is depicted in a technique somewhere between that of the archival botany painter starkly recording paradigmatic specimens and the Surrealists’ pushing for an irrational reconfiguration of natural form. There is, furthermore, something of the Victorian gentleman amateur implied by Fairington’s technique, which is simultaneously brush and detailed, generalized yet technically subtle. With the scale and intensity of the work one feels that the artist is, perhaps inadvertently, touching upon the psychedelic and the monstrous while retaining close contact with the discourse of the botanical specimen and the supposed objectivity of Science – capital S – prior to its descent into the dark introspective dogm of self-doubt. On Coutts’s photographic books Helvis is a copy of Penguin’s 1965 anthology of Stéphane Mallarmé’s writings, within which can be found his much-quoted remark about art conjuring up a supreme, essentialist flower, one nonetheless ‘absent from all bouquets’. In the context of Fairington’s crazily ‘straight’ paintings, this aesthetic consideration is entirely apt.

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