

MARION COUTTS Tintype, London, UK

Tucked in an alcove at the back of the gallery is a cluster of drawings, one of which, in a shaky hand, spells out in pale blue the words *Actual Size* (all works 2017). In the context of 'Aiming or Hitting', Marion Coutts's first solo show since 2008, the tautology appears as a gentle reminder to try and focus on the world as it is: a reassurance that everything has its own scale. The exhibition's careful photographs, sparse drawings and slight sculptural installations evince an air of hesitant detachment: a wandering eye and sense of curiosity, tempered with a deliberate step back, a wary distance. In the main room of the gallery, *Curtain* is a line of black vinyl strips that runs from shoulder height to the floor, bisecting half the room like odd, funereal party streamers. Two rounded pieces of chalkboard occupy the opposite wall, each shaped like the conjoined circular outline of an image as seen through a pair of binoculars. There are no ghosts of words or remnants of anything ever having been written on them, just the faint residual lines of chalk that always stay behind when you try to wipe a chalkboard clean. This deliberate blankness sets the tone for the whole show, while the work's title gives us our stage instructions of where to remain: *The Middle Distance*.

Framed photographs are hung at various heights around the room seemingly at random, as if a paper plane has been thrown at the wall to determine where they should be placed. Indeed, two of the images show grounded paper planes, their numbers suggesting dozens of whizzing attempts: *Paper Plane 101* is a sleek, neatly folded example, while *Paper Plane 34* is slightly tattered, its nose scrunched

from impact. But these works don't feel as playful as they sound: rather, they are a melancholic study in coming to a sudden halt. As the title of the exhibition implies, there is the preparation of aiming and the thud of hitting, but no sense of the sudden release of soaring or flying that should be in between. The other images maintain this stillness, focusing on the nape of a small boy's neck in the black and white photo *Boy Looks at Rock on Top of Another Rock* and the well-used disarray of the book shelves in *Library*, filled with volumes of philosophy and art history jumbled and toppled like dominoes. All the photos have a grainy, slightly blurry quality, as if salvaged from long-forgotten negatives found among the mess of those books. The bottom half of *False Acacia Aurea* is tinted a deep yellow, dipped in iodine; colouring the dense green foliage of the image with disinfectant becomes an act of care, of trying preserve whatever these random images used to mean.

Coutts's work as a writer tells its own story, particularly her memoir *The Iceberg* (2014), which documents the death of her partner, art critic Tom Lubbock; and while no artwork, in my opinion, needs biography as ballast, her work here seemed determined *not* to tell a story, to hover listlessly on the threshold of articulation. As in the photo *Projector with Colour Removed*, a hazy white circle marked with squiggles of dust that hangs highest on the wall, attempting to focus on nothing still produces something. Coutts's lines of dust and chalk feel like blank screens, waiting, in vain, for things to be projected upon them. 'Aiming or Hitting' gives us a set of empty stages, lined with curtains from behind which we wait for the artist to emerge.

Chris Fite-Wassilak



Above
Nadim Abbas,
Camoufleur, 2017,
performance
documentation

Below
Marion Coutts,
'Aiming or Hitting',
2017, installation view



NADIM ABBAS, Vitrine, London, UK

Bermondsey Square in south-east London is an early example of the kind of mixed-use urban regeneration project that now proliferates across the city. Opened in 2009, it provides housing, a supermarket, hotel and cinema, and a visual arts programme currently managed by Vitrine. One of the more unconventional exhibition spaces in London, Vitrine is a 16-metre-long window display divided into three units along the facade of an apartment building. For 'Camoufleur', Hong Kong artist Nadim Abbas has wallpapered two of the units with a reworked camouflage print, updated with blue and yellow decorative elements. Camouflage patterns, which combine the principles of mimicry and concealment were originally developed by the military to evoke specific environments. In this case, sage green and warm grey tints simulate the muted palette of high-end household paints. The installation is furnished with stools, potted palms and three robotic vacuum cleaners; a monitor on the floor plays a looped animation depicting the molecular structure of the allergenic protein found in cat's spit and sebum.

At specific times each week, a lone performer wearing camouflage overalls and a helmet with bulging red eyes and silver and yellow stripes – inspired by the Japanese *tokusatsu* (live-action film) character Kamen Rider, a grasshopper-human hybrid – makes his way around the space. He uses a limited register of tentative movements: a sideways creep, back against the wall; a twitch of the head like a double

take; and an ambiguous pose with legs crossed at the ankles, hands clasped behind his back and head cocked. It looked demure to me, although his obscured face made it impossible to read emotion or intention with any degree of confidence. A passer-by charging across Bermondsey Square noticed him, appeared momentarily bemused and went on her way.

A printed text available from a weatherproof plastic box fixed to the facade of the gallery points out Abbas's interest in the Japanese social types of *otaku* (young people obsessed with computers or popular culture) and *hikikomori* (extreme recluses), positing the connection between confined domestic environments and such personality traits. By staging a voyeuristic situation in which passers-by can watch a young man enclosed in a glass cubicle who can only partially see through his opaque mask, 'Camoufleur' crystallizes these dynamics of self-consciousness, obsession and seclusion. A poignant scene encapsulated the passive defensiveness exuded by the performer and his blending in with his environment: a robot vacuum cleaner switched itself on, left its charging dock and rolled towards him, knocking over rolls of tape stacked up in its path. It hovered near his unresponsive feet before beating a retreat, heaving itself over a tangle of cables that lay across its way home. An intensely zoomorphic machine, the robot vacuum cleaner seemed disoriented and awkward yet – in its eagerness to suck up dirt, dust and allergens that might irritate his owner – it struck me as the perfect companion and carer for a socially stunted loner.

When the redesigned Bermondsey Square was first opened, the company behind the regeneration project described its ideal demographic as 'people who are attracted to the vibe that comes from inner-city living', calling them 'urban safarians'. At this moment, the shape of that demographic is up for debate, with uncertainty over the fate of more than a million European Union citizens in London, the potential economic catastrophe of Brexit and increasingly polarized standards of living. It's unclear what cosmopolitanism will look like in years to come, and whether it will be more like a safari or a military expedition. Abbas's troubling tableau draws our attention to the ways in which those unable or unwilling to deal with the complexities modern society disappear into diminished lives. It is a dramatic counterexample to the mass participation the city will require to meet the challenges it currently faces.

Ellen Mara De Wachter

CLAIRE BARCLAY, Tramway, Glasgow, UK

The first thing that struck me as I entered Tramway's vast main gallery space was the smell. Evocative rather than unpleasant, it was the odor of the factory and workshop, of engine oil and machinery, grease and metal, precision engineering and brute industrial force. There were more odours of industry as I walked round this former tram shed, navigating a series of eight installations (*Yield Point*, 2017). Consisting of fabricated objects that foreground the materials and processes of mechanization, each element at the same time betrays its lack of utility, form hinting at but not delivering any discernible function.

Claire Barclay's carefully configured sculptural arrangements occupy the space with a mix of menace and forlornness. They are made from, amongst other things, steel and cast-concrete, machined aluminium and rubber, brass mesh and white ceramic, canvas and printed fabric – practical, purposeful materials born of the industrial age. These works appear robust and reliable yet, as suggested by the exhibition's title – in mechanical engineering, a 'yield point' is the moment at which a solid material loses its elasticity and becomes permanently deformed – there is tension and uncertainty, too. Drama fills the gallery. Grease is smeared on metal, oil soaks into suede and black thread, and the smells of the factory floor are complemented by the colours of the same: bright orange powder-coated steel, jet-black rubber drive belts, the silver sheen of aluminium, roughly stitched mustard-yellow canvas.

The forensic focus on materials and their ability to evoke memory and emotion is a constant in Barclay's practice. So, too, is the importance of process in her work: these installations, like those in previous shows, were created in-situ, with the gallery space acting as a temporary studio in the lead-up to the exhibition's opening. *Yield Point* responds to Tramway's late-Victorian industrial architecture and can, in part, be seen as continuing the artist's dialogue with her home city's manufacturing history. Her commission for last year's Glasgow International, *Bright Bodies* (2016), was installed in the part-derelict Kelvin Hall – host to the 1951 Festival of Britain's Exhibition of Industrial Power and for many years the home of a popular circus.

Yet, while *Bright Bodies* referenced the decline of traditional industries and the cultural and societal changes associated with this, *Yield Point* – though much larger in scale – is more intimate in tone. The tension here

seems to be between the hardness of mechanization – its repetition and exactness – and the vulnerability, the waywardness, of human behaviour, of flesh and bone. In oblique ways, the human body exerts a kind of ghostly presence throughout the exhibition. A grouping of three interlinked cage-like steel structures in the centre of the gallery calls to mind workplace lockers, stripped back to their frames and peppered with welded-on metal prongs that point slightly upwards, like oversized coat pegs. Elsewhere, cast-concrete 'sinks' have been filled with now-set liquid soap, evoking scenes of grime being scrubbed from hands at the end of a factory shift. More menacingly, smooth, flowing shapes cut from pinky-orange rubber hang on hooks like flayed skin.

These hints of the human form suggest industrial workers that both facilitate and disrupt the manufacturing process: the oil and poison in the industrial machine. While mechanization in all its forms can dehumanize and desensitize, the message of *Yield Point* seems, ultimately, to be an optimistic one – that the point of no return is yet to be reached and that the human spirit is not easily broken.

Chris Sharratt

Claire Barclay,
Yield Point, 2017,
installation view

