

Make it (beyond) real

A group of younger artists shows exhilarating figurative possibilities. By Jackie Wullschlager

Last winter, trawling young artists' studios in south London, I came across a metre-high white board scored with frenetic finger-marks of pink, rose, crimson, brown, occasional lilac, patches of turquoise and aquamarine. Uneven surfaces of thick impasto, blotchy thumb-prints, rough smudges alternated with delicate passages and areas of bare board. Up close, one could make out, among apparently abstract gestural marks, suggestions of the female figure, depicted from too near to see in its entirety – too near not to touch.

This charged, flesh-coloured work evoked the softness, languor, elation, resistance, surrender of a sexual encounter. The packed, inchoate surface responded to today's accelerated visual overload, yet the play of light falling on a body in an interior was classical, as well as immediate, physical. It opened a cycle of nine works, Shaun McDowell's "Confessions and Love Paintings", which rework the nude – and the experience of painting directly from the model – in a 21st-century idiom that is sophisticated and astute but not ironic, and not afraid of grand painterly statements.

The reunited series is the first thing you see on entering Parasol Unit's thoughtful new group show *Visible Invisible: Against the Security of the Real*, and it is a provocative introduction to director Ziba Ardalan de Weck's theme. Showing four painters born between 1969 and 1981, she explores in

The show explores in contemporary form a force that has driven art for the past hundred years

contemporary form a force that has driven art for the past hundred years: how to capture perceptual experience while making work that asserts its status as painting, not mere recapitulation of reality.

Cézanne aimed to take a fragment of nature and "make it entirely painting". Braque believed a painting "must constitute a pictorial event", Klee that "the object of painting is not to render the visible, but to render visible that which is not visible". This is the agenda, revisited via Bacon, de Kooning, comics, porn magazines and camera snaps, that in different ways informs the tense figurative/abstract battles of Cecily Brown, Katy Moran, Maaike Schoorel and McDowell at the show.

Brown, most senior of the quartet, acknowledges a debt to de Kooning in her fat, luscious strokes, fragmented figural representation and surging compositions. Celebrated for her sexy, witty take on testosterone-pumped abstract expressionism, she juxtaposes rowdy references to popular culture with historical plunder, from Rubens to Delacroix. Parasol includes a single, marvellous example of her 1990s all-over junkscapes, the packed, over-heated "Suddenly Last Summer", recently sold for \$662,500. Otherwise flamboyantly sexual subjects are avoided in favour of more sombre, cerebral works, suggesting Brown as existentialist as well as sensualist.

"Aujourd'hui Rose" restructures its source – a 19th-century print of two girls playing with a dog – into a modern vanitas framed by a skull. The girls' dark heads are eye sockets, their pet, smothered in embroidery, is the nasal cavity, their pretty dresses taper to a gaping mouth. A dozen revelatory



Shape-shifters (above)
Cecily's Brown's 'Aujourd'hui Rose' (2005); (left) 'Ledger' by Katy Moran (2008)

smaller works – surfaces splashy and oozing, some in fleshy reds and browns, others in unusual green-mauves – turn skull and figures around, about, inside out, losing images only to regain them. They are, Brown says, "a kind of alchemy – the paint is transformed into image, and paint and image transform into a third and new thing. I want to catch something in the act of becoming something else."

If Brown and McDowell remix art's heroic language, Moran and Schoorel answer in a minor key, with *intimiste*, self-contained works that nonetheless have the energy of painting as performance. Schoorel, a minimalist paradoxically drawn to the decorative, reduces her sources – mostly photographs of friends, including here a portrait of Turner Prize contender Roger Hiorns, and elegant constructions such as "Emma-Louise in front of her dressing mirror" and "Self-portrait sitting on a bed" – to sparse pastel touches. Allowing only outlines to emerge from canvases washed in white, pale pink, wan yellow, she forces us to slow down, to acknowledge the complexity of looking in a fractured, over-stimulated visual environment.

Moran, too, references shape-shifting contemporary life, the speed with which images appear then dissolve on screens or mobile phones. Layering spontaneous, fluid marks on small canvases until the moment just before a form takes shape, she pushes abstraction to the limits of representation in flurried, baroque arcs and loops. There are hints of landscape – stormy seas in "Volestere", rocks and waves in "Salter's Edge" – but also of the passage of time and emotional flux: from dawn pink to midnight blue in "Meeting in Love", from airy brightness to claustrophobic density in the lovely, taut "Nature Boy".

Ardalan de Weck's success is to highlight certain trends in 21st-century painting while giving a sense of the individual evolution of each artist. Moran's "Lady Things", just completed at a Tate St Ives residency, includes collage elements. Alluding to St Ives school colours and forms, it offers a new materiality and makes one wonder where this open-ended, subtle and quietly insistent artist will go next.

McDowell's "Confessions" series, too, is followed by a fresh cycle, shown for the first time, whose starting point is the female figure within landscape, flooded with natural light, painted in oil stick in fraught, audacious colour.

Cleverly, these are juxtaposed with a reclining figure by 89-year-old Hans Josephsohn, whose sculpted heads and torsos, placed in each gallery, anchor the younger work to modernist traditions. Like McDowell, Josephsohn works from the model without preliminary drawings, and a freedom of handling – and, it must be said, macho vigour – unites these two across the generations. But throughout, Josephsohn's boulder-like, unpolished figures, with their irregular, crumpled surfaces, illuminate the paintings. Solid, stoic, classical in conception, they also look unfinished, as if coming into being or sliding back into chaos – resisting like all the artists here "the security of the real" for more extreme, exhilarating figurative possibilities.

'Visible Invisible: Against the Security of the Real', Parasol Unit, London, to February 7 2010. www.parasol-unit.org

COLLECTING SPECIAL

See this week's 8-page supplement for Art Basel Miami Beach: the rise in antiques; silver; Old Masters; Hollywood glamour up for sale... and more
www.ft.com/collecting



GET YER YA-Y
40th Anniversary