

Leigh Martin: Bizarre blooms of engineering

Andrew Clifford

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Bizarre blooms of engineering

VISUAL ARTS: Andrew Clifford talks to painter Leigh Martin about the ideas germinating his flower images.

What: *Noise* by Leigh Martin

Where and when: Jensen Gallery, 61 Upper Queen Street, Newton until the end of August

Auckland painter Leigh Martin's latest exhibition *Noise* may seem a radical departure from the spare abstraction of his previous work. But even a room full of floral prints can push the boundaries of the painterly process, leading him into the parallel realms of photography and experimental music.

For Martin, images of flowers are so generic and ubiquitous they allow the viewer to see beyond the actual imagery. "I think that they almost become fields," he says. "I'm not interested in flowers in terms of their symbolic value. In fact, in most of these cases, I don't know what these flowers are. Obviously, they reference flowers, but that's more in the way that, in the context of the history of painting or photography, flowers are quite a clichéd subject."

Taking found images from seed packets, magazines and photographs, Martin has created the large canvases using a machine that prints with oil paint. Martin enjoys the inconsistencies it produces. "Painting has always been associated with the individual and with hand marks, which the machine has never been located in, so I thought it was quite a bizarre, almost absurd project. But what I enjoyed about the machine is that, in itself, it contained glitches.

"It didn't know how to translate digital information using something like oil paint and there were always stoppages and breakages. A lot of the time, colours are completely misread and information is shifted. So that became an essential point for the work."

"There is a certain part where I like to hand it over to the machinery and let it throw up mistakes. Through the way that I process the image [with] the technology I've used, it eliminates certain elements or information, which is out of my control.

"A friend of mine who is a botanist had a look at some of these flowers and said, 'I can't even define what flower they are because they seem to have too many petals or they're never that colour.'"

Although Martin's earlier works were hand-painted, they shared a similar interest in exploiting the limitations of the painting process. Beginning with carefully gridded bands of wet colour, based on the hatching of designers Letratone, he would methodically modulate the paint, brushing it vertically and horizontally.

"With the Immersion and the Dissolve series, that was more about the body," he explains. "All the works were done in one sitting and as my arm became tired, following a repetitive pattern, my body had inbuilt glitches. There was a point where it began to break down. I'd only paint them until the paint would start to grip or dry and then I'd walk away from it."

“With these [new works], it’s almost like I could say there’s no rhythm in there but in actual fact there is. When I used to talk about my earlier paintings, I used to term the process as being metronomic “from the metronome” because I think it did also encompass the element of time, when paintings were taking anywhere from six to 24 hours.”

Littered throughout Martin’s discussion of his work are terms usually associated with other disciplines, especially music. In terms of recording, noise is extraneous and unwanted information, such as crackles, hiss or distortion. Computer glitches can create unpredictable outcomes but there is now a well-established genre of experimental electronic music, known as glitch, that creates entire soundworlds from these tiny electronic tantrums.

And when using the common image processing software, Photoshop, “noise” is the name of an effect that can be intentionally added to add the speckles most film restorers spend a fortune removing.

This interdisciplinary approach can be traced back to Martin’s studies abroad. Halfway through a ten-year stint in Britain, Martin entered Glasgow School of Art in 1990, at a time when the future of painting seemed to be in question.

“I went back, as a lot of painters did, looking not so much at what paint could represent outside itself but how paint could become a signifier; how the brush-stroke, the medium, the process itself could come to represent some kind of meaning.

“My painting became very much painting about painting and I don’t think that’s changed with these works. I’ve just brought in and mined the areas of graphic design, photography and filmic qualities in the work.

Equally pivotal was a scholarship that allowed him to spend the third year of his degree in Chicago.

“I think it kind of threw everything up in the air for me. At that point, I was lucky enough to see performances by people like Laurie Anderson, became interested in a whole lot of different influences “sound work and so on. In fact, I was so disillusioned with the painting department in Chicago that I spent the whole year doing film theory, philosophy and practical. And that’s where the interest in sound and glitch [arose], in terms of what happens to film.”

Martin still has strong ties with Glasgow and was recently asked to investigate starting a course there that would have visual arts students collaborating with composition students. He is also starting to experiment with creating his own soundwork.

“I’m more interested in working in field-recording rather than actually composing music per se. In terms of painting, too, people laugh or knock the so-called “field-painter” because painters don’t really work in that way “there are very few painters I know who actually pick up an easel and take it out to an environment to work directly from that environment.

“Most of us work through photographs or found imagery or whatever, in the same way that I’ve done that with Noise. Some of these images are from seed-packets, some are from magazines, from a whole wide variety of sources and I suppose that is what we call a field artist, in some respects.

“One of the things that is important to my entire practice as a painter, and also with the photographic works and so on, is that I always use technology which is quite simple and accessible. A lot of this also refers to so-called household painter and decorators. A lot of the tools I use are rag-rolling or DIY tools. I like working with so-called technologies that are somewhat redundant in some ways. I think this kind of redundancy aspect comes into both the choice of imagery but also the way in which I process the works and, with the sound-works, I never want something that I can fully grasp.

On a recent trip to Britain, Martin's interest in sound and experimental music prompted him to track down BBC sound-recordist Chris Watson.

"I knew Chris Watson from his days in [the band] Cabaret Voltaire but was just interested in this person who works primarily as a sound-recordist. There was something about the quality and detail of his recording of natural phenomena. It was so clear that the technology allowed him to capture every aspect and every detail of it that we wouldn't normally hear, to the point that it was almost abstract. I think that was what really interested me about it – that I couldn't relate these sounds to any phenomena I knew of. It was almost sanitised to a point that it was really the technology speaking more than natural phenomena. Listening to these sounds, it almost becomes a sensory activity, not just in terms of hearing, but there's almost confusion. But then again, it's also that kind of work that locates the subject very much within the audience, and that's what really intrigued me about it.

"I've always been more interested in creating work which, in some sense, the viewer becomes the subject. So they're more aware of their sensations, their feelings, their reactions, their emotions, rather than it being located in the work. The work becomes a trigger as opposed to the central focus is the work. I think that's something that sound-work has always offered and been able to do. In terms of the visual work, I've tried to figure out if that's something that is obtainable from a fixed static image.

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