

DUBLIN

Aurélien Froment

MOTHER'S TANKSTATION

You can learn a lot watching Aurélien Froment's videos. The works of this Dublin-based Frenchman have a determinedly instructional disposition, showing and telling about a wide range of unrelated subjects. Consider two of his widely shown previous works: *Rabbits*, 2009, for instance, is a close-up demonstration of how to tie eight nautical knots—the stages of each nifty technique captured in an accompanying kid-friendly mnemonic device (“Build a well, a rabbit comes out of the hole, circles around the tree, and jumps back into the hole”). In *Fourdrinier Machine Interlude*, 2010, Froment's gliding camera studies the mechanisms of an old miniature paper-making machine, found by the artist in a museum in Basel. Simultaneously, a young girl reads a text on the history of paper production, chronicling its development from cottage industry to mass-industrial concern. The ingenue narrator delivers these documented certainties as only a schoolgirl can: in a voice both afflicted and energized by uncertainty, shifting between hesitancy and hurry.

Froment's variants on the “educational film” could easily be taken straight—as visual essays summarizing minor topics, condensed guides that might credibly serve as resources in a teaching context. Their studiously controlled compositions point to communicative clarity as a prized virtue. Indeed, reflection on the tools of teaching has become one ongoing priority of Froment's research. A number of his recent projects concern classroom materials designed by nineteenth-century pedagogical pioneer Friedrich Froebel. The German educator's influential belief was that pedagogy is best partnered with play—and this principle has become central to Froment's investigative and inventive ethos. The artist is skilled above all in staging expert knowledge—recognizable, trustworthy, and historically grounded—while at the same time introducing acute instabilities into established situations of presentation and reception. In his videos, each occasion of authoritative delivery contains an essential degree of doubt.

This balance—or tendency toward imbalance—was critical to the impressive two-screen video installation *9 Intervals*, 2011/2012, at Mother's Tankstation. Originally commissioned as a series of unlikely educational shorts to be slotted into cinema programs before the main feature at the Hyde Park Picture House in Leeds, UK, the discrete episodes have since been knitted together as an intricately tricky portmanteau piece. Among the fragments stitched together in this work are mini-lectures by designer, artist, writer, and editor Will Holder, posing as a somewhat nervous academic; athletic demonstrations by an admirably flexible yoga instructor; and deadpan shots of grinding factory machines. The expanded dual-screen format of the piece helps to set up uneasy correspondences between disparate imagery, as well as witty contrast points between divergent expert positions. We play “spot the difference,” for example, between Holder's stuttering introduction and a polished presentation by an “ergonomist,” or, later, between narrated instructions for operating an adjustable chair and near-slapstick attempts to work the actual mechanism.

Position is a crucial term for this installation in another sense, too. Froment addresses a matter of concern for both relaxed cinema audiences and invariably less comfortable gallery viewers: the fundamental problem of how to most suitably seat the human body. Assorted sites and seats of either leisure or labor have thus been selected for attention. We observe slumped, fidgeting moviegoers waiting for a screening to start. We see students sitting straight-backed at school desks. We watch ambitious yoga exercises being performed: hard-won efforts to escape the ordinary burden of embodiment that are nonetheless paralleled



Aurélien Froment, *9 Intervals*, 2011/2012, two synched HD video projections, color, sound, 19 minutes 43 seconds. Installation view.

with mundane—but oddly compatible—shots of bending, straining chair mechanisms. Playing against such inconclusive “practice” is “theory”: orthopedic advice on posture, for instance, or a detailed history of the chair. More than ever, though, Froment has managed to trouble the straightforward conveyance of knowledge. Within the set of strained relations established by this remarkably taut video anthology, any sense of communicative certainty sits uncomfortably.

—Declan Long

PARIS

Merlin James

GALERIE LES FILLES DU CALVAIRE

Spanning more than fifteen years, the twenty-one works collected in Merlin James's exhibition “Painting” epitomize his signature blend of dizzyingly diverse subjects, styles, and techniques. From a faux-naive still life with bird rendered in thick earth tones, *Male Bird (Pecking)*, 2008–11, to a minimalist study in turquoise just barely suggesting architecture (*Building*, 2008); from *Untitled*, 2009, a gritty close-up of a sex act, to *Burn and Grotto*, ca. 2000–2009, an abstract diptych that has been burned, punctured, and collaged, James—an art critic as well as a painter—is consistent only in his determination to eschew genre, comparison, and easy description.

Included in this roundup were five “frame paintings,” made on sheer nylon or polyester sheets through which the frame's infrastructure (screws, staples, stretcher bars) as well as added decorative objects are visible. Three of these—*Red Frame*, 2009; *Dark*, 2011; and *Silver*, 2011—were nonrepresentational, their titles direct references to the frames themselves. More complex were two landscapes in which figurative elements on both sides of the diaphanous scrim work in tandem to create recognizably Jamesian topographies. Like miniature stage sets, these scenes negotiate distinct physical planes: the back and front of the painted surface and the shallow three-dimensional space between the frame and the wall. *House in Marshes*, 2011, depicts a lone hilltop tree and a small structure in the outlying wetlands. The knoll is demarcated by a triangular piece of drab material—a kind of cardboard, affixed on the wall side of the scrim—that slopes up to the right as it runs along the bottom of the composition. Messy dabs and smudges of muted coral, khaki, and cream on the painting's surface pull the hill into the foreground while describing its swampy texture. Using a concoction of acrylic and hair, James gives the tree (the largest element in the composition) an organic, if grisly, appearance. The distant house on the painting's left side is, in fact, a wooden miniature. The inclusion of a



Merlin James, *House in Marshes*, 2011, mixed media on MDF, 23 3/8 x 31 1/8"

purple wash, interrupted by circular blotches of blue-green and yellowy gold. A small circle of shimmering white in the center of the painting suggests a high-noon sun. This sparser and more abstract composition focuses attention onto the frame, which appears simultaneously structural and mimetic. In addition to being represented by a wooden model, the structure mentioned in the title is reiterated through the triangulated support slats of the frame, which evoke the wood-beam construction of a peaked roof as seen from below.

What makes this emphasis on frames so striking is that James has heretofore avoided them. Frequently, he manipulates the sides and corners of his paintings, including many in this show. From the striped fabric visible around the edges of *Black Bird*, 2004–11, to the painted gray and tan bands bracketing each side of *Loon*, 2008, James tends to work beyond the traditional boundaries of the canvas and often paints or collages borders directly onto his compositions. Rather than a retreat to convention, the use of actual frames in these recent works is an extension of this critical practice and a challenge to conventional modes of display. Treating the frame as raw material, James elevates it to an integral part of the artwork itself and, in so doing, thwarts the frame's ability to confine or objectify his paintings.

—Mara Hoberman

BERLIN

Katja Novitskova

KRAUPA-TUSKANY

The two most eye-catching objects in Katja Novitskova's recent show were images of animals mounted on aluminum cutouts: a stately pair of emperor penguins standing across from each other (*Approximation I*; all works 2012) and the head of a young giraffe nuzzling its mother (*Approximation II*). Although the former is adapted from an entry to a *National Geographic* photo competition, this backstory is hardly relevant: Both images have long since dispersed and multiplied online on sites such as Tumblr and Pinterest. Removed from their original context, they boast an attractiveness—as images, which is to say, as sites for affective identification—that is part of the sustained and radical argument of Novitskova's exhibition.

Like others exploring the “post-Internet” condition, Novitskova, an Estonian artist based in Amsterdam, sees that the lines between image and referent, between virtual and real, have been rendered unstable by an insistent reappropriation of all forms of representation. But she pushes beyond the easy relocations of digital into physical that make up one dominant strand of such work to make the case that the distinctions between the man-made and the natural, and

found object and its placement behind the scrim suggest a link to Joseph Cornell, but James's works are not assemblages; covered with paint, ranging from watery smears to luscious blisters, their surfaces—including parts of the frames themselves—declare them as paintings.

Farm Building Gold Frame, 2011, also depicts a small wooden house and lone painted tree. In this case, both scenic elements are located at the bottom edge of the composition. The painting is dominated by a ruddy

between art and the evolutionary process, have also come undone.

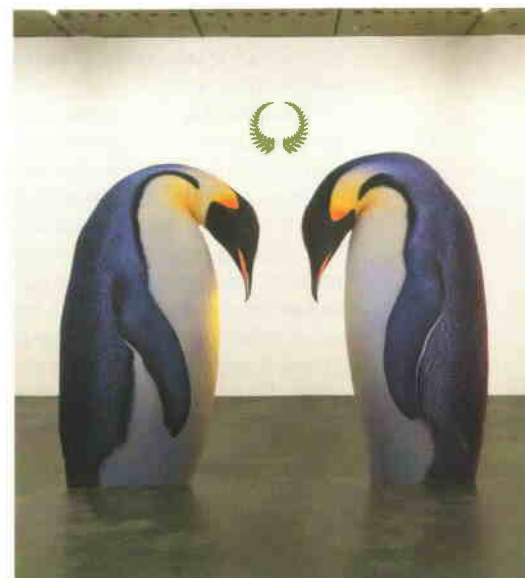
In *The Cambrian Explosion 001*, one of four faux-textbook illustrations on papyrus shown here, a photo of a dolphin equipped by the US military with a digital camera—itsself revealing an erosion of the boundary between biological and technological—is overlaid with images of digital cameras, like so many variations of a species. In a statement on her website, Novitskova is explicit about the scientific premise of such works: “Human-made artifacts such as texts, products, images, and the expanding digital environments [are all] forms that co-exist in complex ecologies of matter and value.”

This exhibition's heady mix of evolutionary thinking with images and objects constituting what the artist calls “info-matter” thus offered another means of channeling the old avant-garde project of undoing the division between art and life, folding the former not into the social but the natural world, by considering art as a “real result of human evolution.” Hence, too, the role of animals in her work: Humans have an “immediate emotional reaction” to them—and, it's implied, to images of them—that is itself an evolutionary bias. Our attraction to cat videos has the same biological basis as our attraction to art.

A vitrine containing mushroom-shaped pillars topped by panels of silicon wafers, 99.9999999% *pure harvest*, advanced Novitskova's case still further. The hardware underpinning our digital environment is not metaphorically but literally part of the natural world: Even silicon is “grown.” Conversely, the reach of the evolutionary framework proposed in the exhibition was extended to the beginning of time in *Unfolding Inflation, from 0 to infinity*, a rolled-up fabric mesh bearing a rendering of the aftermath of the big bang, with a crude plastic tree—a marker for the beginning of life, as well as for mass-produced kitsch—set into the top of it.

Win Win, a bright-green laurel wreath visible high on the wall behind the penguins, could be interpreted as a possibly tongue-in-cheek reflection on the audacity of Novitskova's philosophy. Whether in the form of an image or, as here, a technically immaculate imitation, no variant of the wreath that once crowned ancient Greek athletes can today be understood without the viewer taking into account the symbolism that has developed through its repeated cultural use. The framing implied by Novitskova's exhibition suggested that the meaning thus accrued is no different, in evolutionary terms, from the success of an Internet meme, a commercial product—or an artwork.

—Alexander Scrimgeour



View of “Katja Novitskova,” 2012–13. Foreground: *Approximation I*, 2012. Background: *Win Win*, 2012.

LÜNEBURG, GERMANY

Nina Könnemann

HALLE FÜR KUNST LÜNEBURG

The “Illuminations” of Blackpool have been a tradition for more than 120 years. An English seaside town that drew early waves of mass tourism, Blackpool reinvented itself—after a slow season in 1879—as an