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Merlin James at Parasol Unit, Per Kirkeby at Michael Werner

Written by Dan Coombs



Are, 2006 – 2013, Acrylic on canvas, 117 x 152 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Mummery + Schnelle, London. © Merlin James

In a world of spectacular logic there's something refreshing about a painter who refuses to pin down his subjects. Letting the motifs of his work emerge, as if by magic, from the formal matrix of his paintings, Merlin James risks whimsicality but instead finds something new in the easily forgotten. Like a burnished coin found in the crevice of a pocket James's paintings have an almost uncanny familiarity, as though we are rediscovering something previously kept hidden. His boats, his trees, his chugging trains and lolling bridges are fleetingly familiar, like memories, landmarks on a journey through an intricate mental landscape.

James's images are of the sorts of things that everybody finds unbearably lovely – windmills, signal boxes and stormy seas, neglected buildings, deserted beaches and abandoned follies. He inhabits these subjects and paints them without any irony but with an enormous sense of loss. As soon as the motif is captured, it disappears back into the paint and there is a sense, even with the simplest of motifs, that the act of representation is fugitive and almost impossible to achieve. In this way James is able to infuse the most quotidian of motifs with a feeling of poignancy, making us feel that the thing depicted, rather than being kitsch or twee, embodies an elusive mystery. James's pictures initially appear benign, but after a while, like old photographs, they seem to return our gaze from the past. In finding something mysterious in the overly familiar our attachment to these simple things is intensified.



Merlin James, *Effet de Lune*, 2011 Acrylic on canvas 47 x 62.5 cm (18½ x 24¾ in) Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York © Merlin James

The feel of James's paintings is primitive and raw, more raw in some instances than Alfred Wallis. The wonky stretchers and deliberately battered surfaces have a damaged, abject quality which heightens the feeling of longing for the wide open spaces he simultaneously evokes. Into his painted surfaces he includes slightly grating collage elements of string or hair or shards of bamboo. A favourite device is the hole cut into the canvas surface, which as in a Fontana, is bounded by the painted surface yet simultaneously suggests infinite space. In *Dark (Trees)* (1989 – 2012), the hole is hardly bigger than a grain of rice, and precisely echoes a tiny fleck of orange paint that hovers alongside it in an ominous sky – the haiku-like evocation of the absent presence of a bird is breathtaking. In *Cat* (c.1991) the hole becomes humorously banal – a flapless cat-flap for the crude cat to disappear through.

James is fundamentally a picture-maker and uses formal devices to open out pictorial space. To be a painter of pictures in the contemporary art world is, surprisingly, not easy. For the institutionalised avant-garde painting is dead and picture-making never existed. Current logic dictates that the picture is overruled by the literalness of minimalism and post-minimalism. The picture was also pulverised by Clement Greenberg who thought the essence of painting was flatness; beaten into submission by conceptual art and the use of language; trampled on by photography, and rendered mute by film. More recently picture-making has been paralysed by the language of advertising – in Jeff Koons's studio the assistant's brush never slips. Picturing yourself, in contrast, requires a certain amount of lyric attitude and is more grueling. Merlin James's paintings are outside any notion of spectacle, and as with the paintings of Raoul de Keyser, they are a relief from the manufactured excesses of corporate art. It's beguiling to encounter paintings that emanate such an intimacy.



Harbour, 2011, Acrylic on polyester, wood frame, 38 x 74 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co New York. © Merlin James

James has recently started using see-through polyester in place of canvas so that beyond and behind the painting one can see the stretcher bars, which are used as compositional props for little model houses or images on the painted surface. This play with the conventions of the picture plane recalls the work of Sigmar Polke. Polke had a way of taking pictorial devices apart, mingling them with abstraction and the notion of chance and contingency, and setting them spinning to produce gigantic metaphysical tableau, in which phantom images appear as clusters of pixellated molecules. Polke had something of the magician about him, and Merlin is also a fine illusionist. However the feel of James's work is completely different. James's paintings can seem disarmingly simple, like children's art. The house in 93 (1986-c.1996) is like a child's painting of home that becomes *unheimlich*, in a manner reminiscent of L.S. Lowry. He counterpoints faux-naivete with a sophisticated awareness of a European tradition of formal abstraction – obscure Parisian daubers from the 1930s, as well as early European abstraction, stimulate his imagination.



Merlin James, Chalet and Other Building, 2009, Acrylic on canvas with wood and mixed media, 152.4 x 121.9 cm, Image courtesy of Collection Charles Asprey, London © Merlin James

Perhaps the picture, rather than the painting, is the form that most corresponds to internal space. In the picture, the flat surface becomes a potential, virtual and imaginative world. Being able to carve out and define the lineaments of an internalised consciousness is what grounds this artist and allows him to achieve a raw clarity, but it is an autonomy and stubborn independence that the colossal corporate art world will barely recognise. So who needs pictures now? Answer; people who have walls.

The painting as picture will continue to proliferate as it fulfils a basic function of art; to open up a new space on a wall. Rather than aping American art Merlin James turns inwards and this explains his need for pictures.



Per Kirkeby: Recent Paintings installation view, copyright Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London

At the Michael Werner Gallery a show of the paintings of Per Kirkeby provides a litmus test for James's work. Will the Welsh primitive stand up to the Scandinavian heavyweight? Curiously Kirkeby's paintings seem much more conventional and academic than James's. In some ways I felt myself in awe of Kirkeby's greens and coppers and yellows, and the dramatic attack and boldness of his strokes. Yet after James's work Kirkeby's paintings seem too full, with an overstuffed quality that could be reminiscent of Bonnard – but unlike the French master, Kirkeby struggles to achieve distance. Kirkeby's subject is the raw presence of nature, and presence is his forte; presence, fullness and fecundity are everywhere. The paintings have a presentness that is almost Byzantine in its mosaic of gestures, and it is therefore somewhat predictable in the massive *Untitled* (2013), the largest painting in the show, to see a snake slithering along the floor, and then to notice emerging heads, perhaps of Adam and Eve and to the left perhaps the profile of God. It's not that the work is not impressive. Like an opera, it tries to blow you away with its heightened gestures. Yet it feels strangely theatrical despite the obvious striving for authenticity. Kirkeby elevates his own subjectivity to a heroic plane, a familiar trope from Abstract Expressionism, but what his subjectivity conjures is ultimately wholesome, reminiscent of Baselitz but without the painful awkwardness. He is a compelling lyrical landscape abstractionist who has a tendency to fill every void, and as a result his work ultimately lacks the dramatic tension of say, Joan Mitchell.



Per Kirkeby, "Untitled", 2013, Oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 63 inches,
200 x 160 cm, Copyright Michael Werner Gallery, New York and
London

James's sense of humour and the piquancy of his sense of emptiness creep up on you slowly. James turns dry wit and a self-deprecating abjection back onto himself, and the result is something much more on the edge of reality. He haunts his own work like a ghost, and the atmosphere of his paintings extends far beyond the modest dimensions of his canvases. Though Kirkeby can hardly be dismissed, he's a bit of a blowhard in comparison.

Merlin James is at Parasol Unit until the 10th of August; Per Kirkeby is at Michael Werner until the 27th of July.
