

REVIEW

Dirk Stewen at Maureen Paley

8 October-14 November 2010

by Guy Mannes-Abbott

This is a first solo show for Dirk Stewen in the UK, though he's shown in New York and at home in Germany since 2005. At Maureen Paley in London the work has been judiciously selected and hung to combine large Indian inked photographic paper 'canvases' dressed in finely tuned collages with even more gorgeously relaxed assemblages of photos, sewn paper and fabric, found objects and water-colours all presented with a sublime precision. Disarmingly compelling, altogether this exhibition made me happy to be alive.



Stewen's work is built upon a kind of improvised exactitude that can only be blunted by the words available to translate and celebrate it -especially anything art historical. An art-making like this is uniquely contemporary; acts of utopian vigour rendered in finger-light recoveries, small-scale re-tunings, a purifying invention with what remains to us in its totality and its scraps. Full of sophisticated surprises; what really made me happy is that an art of such unstrained singularity is possible even now.

Throughout Stewen's work it's difficult to distinguish what has been found from what has been made. Upstairs I was diverted into admiring a very beautifully rendered tropical leaf which claims some bodily essence, like veins under a translucent milking breast. Only by being distractedly caught up in it did the alienating jolt of realising that it could not therefore be a found image as it first appears occur -at which an artful if distancing casualness became something more intimate and committedly made.

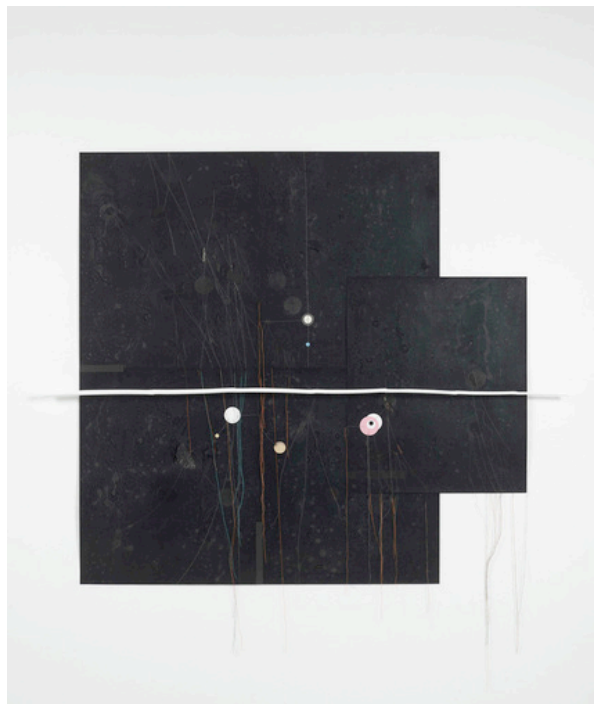


I'll linger with this piece; *untitled, Hamburg*, presented in two parts using ink watercolor gouache on paper, b/w laser copy on blue paper. Altogether it's 42 x 65.5 cm and was made this year. There are two sheets; on the right is that photograph of a fleshy leaf tied to the leg of a white wooden stool. It's 'hung' with Stewen's trademark mild steel needles, as is the striking sampling of his work alongside it; a water-coloured figure, blackly blending hair or burnt head with a skin-warm cloak of a body that could be a part or whole. Blocks of pitch-black Indian ink overlap it, one of which contains cosmic spots of colour. This is all it takes to be magically artful with the humblest of means, long hours and a clarity of visual values.

Opposite is a wall of what is the main body of work; large sewn together photo papers inked out and then dressed with varying assemblages -that word again- of what he calls confetti; cake/truffle cases and circles inked over or bindi-like in colourful intensity. Here Stewen, with unmistakable hints of Miro, has created a dainty cosmos, an impossible universe of bright hopes. Over these elements he's used a sewing machine to draw connections between things and across space. Then there are the colourful curtains of thread; straggly hair, snagged clothes, blues, reds, yellows, often half inked out and hinting at the body of dyed cloth.

These elements recur in Stewen's series of panels; 'blank' found elements from framed images, rear boards, frames, undersize glass compiled and placed with notable elegance. Into the archival mix he adds a fabric clad board detailed with bindi spots, in one case linked by sewn lines, elsewhere related threads hang down below the piece. A photograph has been overlaid with ink like a jet-black shadow of the same tropical plant upstairs.

There are other paintings; photographic prints of passion flowers next to a water coloured figure out of a slightly superior illustrated children's book.



Let me contrast two representative pieces of work. Upstairs with *untitled*, Stewen brings all the elements in his work together in a unsquared 'canvas' of inked sheets with washes of texture which still reflects; the surface broken by sewn lines, bindi-like dots of a varying size, more half-inked colourful strings and before it all is a fine gloss-white bamboo stick, set at a slight remove from the canvas, reflecting blackly on its surface.



Downstairs is a variant condensation in *untitled [Bronx Monkey II]*; a photocopy of a rain forest scaled trunk. Immediately familiar with predictable monkeys, yet there is something lurking in the image that has been chosen not found. One made much more powerful by being hung in an undersized frame and glass so that it can curl up at its free-falling bottom. Draped over and around it in a loose coil are disarmingly clever strips of bright bindi-like spots sewn together to make an impossibly happy daisy chain.

In both pieces everything that relates to something recognisable is reworked with an engaging twist. The bindi-chains drape over a print of the kind of tree which is blessed in India with strings of cotton horizontally binding its trunk. It's a deconstructed reference to those pretty objects; the bindis not mere signs, but enticingly open signifiers. Where there is an ongoing flirtation with aestheticised or remembranced time in the work, both pieces celebrate an all-out, over-the-cliff, made-in-a-room-on-my-own invention.

Stewen's art is joyfully liberated; as quietly scaled as art can be but containing gestures of utopian energy too. It is loose, generative, *über* democratic work, exceedingly precise in its reverencing of frayed or torn edges, the bending line, discolourations of the found and the made. It reminds me of what art is; nothing here needs to exist, nothing is a complete object as such. All passageways are open and yet they lead to almost impossible to achieve things of beautiful exception. Stewen's work is soulfully appreciate of being in time and a world of existent things -of which it sings with mesmerising allure.

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