

VRB Gallery Presents
Playing and Reality
Clausewitzstr. 2, 10629 Berlin
March 1st – June 1st, 2025
Opening Reception: March 1st 4-10 PM

Von Racknitz + Baer Gallery is pleased to present ***Playing and Reality***, a two-person exhibition by Arthur Laidlaw and Dan Rees.

Arthur Laidlaw's multi-layered image-making process begins with photography. Source material is drawn from Laidlaw's exhaustive recording of his own life, producing thousands of negatives. In recent years, the photographs have focused increasingly on intimate moments between family and close friends, motivated in part by a new appreciation for the banal, and a sense of urgency to record otherwise unremarkable moments before they are gone forever. Laidlaw's use of analogue photography therefore can be understood as a response to the anxiety induced image production of the digital age, crystallised within the logic of the demand; 'pics or it didn't happen'.

Laidlaw's photographs remain unprinted. Instead, the negatives are scanned and digitally reassembled as double exposures, destabilising the 'readability' of the image. They are then enlarged, and each digital collage is translated into a charcoal drawing on paper. The drawing compresses the double exposure into a series of lines, flattening the perspective, accentuating or omitting elements of the composition that feel relevant during the drawing and remembering processes. The negatives therefore remain suspended and 'developed' only as drawings rather than as photographs.

The large format drawings that emerge from this process resemble the kind used throughout the renaissance period in preparation for a fresco, contemporaneously known as a 'cartoon'. Throughout the 1500s the 'cartoon' drawing was laid on the wall itself and traced or imprinted onto the wet plaster. Laidlaw mimics this process by cutting out the drawing as a single piece and sticking it flat to primed and stretched hessian. This is then sprayed with gouache and acrylic, before the paper stencil is repositioned and sprayed once more – further doubling and undermining the composition. The result is an assonant visual rhyme, swapping the pop screen prints of Warhol or Rauschenberg for a painstakingly slow process of almost devotional image making.

These devotional elements of traditional craftwork are further echoed through the reworking of the canonical Madonna and Child motif into 'father and child', as seen from the mother's perspective as image maker. The additional painted layers develop a sense of figuration, complicating the logic of the composition through the density of their application. The final image is an impossible compound, too claustrophobic to fully resolve spatially or chronologically.

Dan Rees' recent body of work builds upon his experiments with marbling, an image-making technique that for the artist lies somewhere between painting, printmaking and photography. The somewhat unpredictable technique of marbling references the aesthetics of traditional paper-craft and bookmaking as well as children's early forays into 'art' making. Rees' work often exploits traditional perspectives of 'high' and 'low' materials as a way of interrogating the relationship of painting to art and the relationship of art to broader social and class-related concerns.

The marbling process, Rees explains, “reminds me of developing from negatives, preparing the inks on the surface of water, dipping the different canvases into baths, hosing them down, hanging them up to dry and waiting for the result to emerge.” These works require continuous reflection; Rees repeats the ink application process over many weeks until he finds the right balance of forms. “It is often the case that in the making of a new piece all the previous works will be rendered incomplete by comparison and will be subjected to further revision.” The scale of the works is kept purposefully intimate, resisting non-figurative painting's impulse to go bigger and bigger.

The modest portraits of ‘abstraction’ contain an attention to detail that runs counter to the aleatory process of their making. If process art foregrounds the activity of making over the intended outcome, then Rees’ marble works appear to champion randomness over deliberateness, yet the attention to detail and specificity of material suggests an embrace of visual pleasure. Rees’ works combine an investment in the visual with a desire to undermine and parody that same investment; the inherent neediness at the heart of abstraction is its striving for ‘recognition’. This neediness is also what provides it with its enigmatic quality.

The show borrows its title directly from paediatrician and child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s book ***Playing and Reality*** (1971). A key figure in psychoanalysis, Winnicott, emphasised the importance of play in psychological development, particularly in the formation of a stable and creative self. Winnicott understood infant care not merely as important for the individual but also as having essential social and societal implications. ‘Play’ is positioned in Winnicott’s text as foundational in a child’s artistic and psychological development, allowing for exploration, spontaneity, and a deeper engagement with both the self and the child’s surroundings. Play is not simply an activity for children but a lifelong process that enables growth, imagination, and emotional resilience.

If the contemporary demand for ‘pics or it didn’t happen’ is the trite articulation of an image-based culture (wherein human experience is leveraged for subject validation) then a diminished experience of reality is the price paid for social recognition. This conjured and false self-image reveals itself in its inability to do justice to the spontaneity, abstraction and otherness inherent in external reality. As such, the self becomes only inwardly interested. Under these conditions concepts such as ‘play’ become relegated to the ‘stuff of children’ or the escapism of the ‘culture industry’. This is the inherent solipsism of an image-based culture; a culture whose logic mandates image production by and of itself, that can only logically be internally ‘interpreted’.

This condition does not demand a fetishised return to craft or the ‘jargon of authenticity’. On the contrary, such trends only further obfuscate the neediness of authenticity within today’s culture. It necessitates only a recognition of the dialectical complexity of experience as mediated through psychology and social, economic and historical conditions, which provide, however momentarily, a sense of play or ‘taking part in’ an aesthetic experience.

What Arthur Laidlaw and Dan Rees attempt to articulate in their own ways is the self-negating nature of images, they do so through an engagement with the mechanical processes familiar to analogue photography; the results are an unexpected and unrepeatable series of nuanced and seductively ‘painted’ surfaces.

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