

MICHAEL
SZPAKOWSKI
ON
JAKE
LONGSTRETH

You, we, know very well how the ostensible subject of a painting, the thing portrayed (or suggested by a title) is but a fraction of its meaning.

(Ah... *meaning*... hmm... chary about that; better maybe – ‘affective totality’ or ‘set of suggestions’ and resonances). We know how much *facture* matters (and this is to lamentably understate the thing – it’s more that *facture* and content are separable only as an analytical fiction) and how little of the way reproductions take us towards any sense of the actual art object – nowadays I buy fewer and fewer monographs and try to summon the same sense of occasion, of stolen time, in front of actual paintings as I do the experience of being locked into the duration and unique unfolding in real time of a live concert.

Incidentally, this is why the superb Benjamin was brilliantly wrong to so brilliantly conflate the work of art with its reproduction, and find so much in the way of problem and opportunity there. History and digitisation – the increase in objects which can be reduced to data sets – has possibly made him right-er, but that pesky old aura is simply this, at least on any materialist account, which I guess is what *he would have wanted* – there was an object made *then*, with *this* and *that*, sometimes with new bits of *this* and *that* carefully added for one purpose or another, and now it is *here*, in front of us, or *there*, not so. One day, like us, it will die. When that happens, reproductions (not of course the right word at all; *visual aide-memoires*?...actually *images* does fine) and writings, will represent its tailing off, its final echoes, until they themselves fade

and vanish too. In the meantime the aura is simply where our subjectivity meets these facts.

Which is an extended way of introducing the difficulty of writing about the American artist Jake Longstreth – one has only seen his work in reproduction (ironically, on a web site). Fortunately, you and I, we know a thing or too. We live in a world of extended connections – we can make more or less educated guesses, fill in the blanks from the data pertaining to size, materials, dates etc. We can adduce from the wider social and cultural background: influence, rejection of influence, striking off at a tangent. We can, to an extent, imaginatively translate back from the digital image to the actual object, within limits, making good guesses as to how materials were applied, but of course it’s precisely the way a painting’s ‘image content’ resolves (another way of saying how much can be lost) either with distance or reproduction – that makes this problematic.

On that basis I’m going a Sherlock Holmes way around Longstreth’s website, and the wager I’ll make during and after is that the work really deserves to be seen here in the UK, in the paint. I don’t think I’m wrong. I could be. I don’t think so. I hope we’ll get to find out before too long. Images of Longstreth’s work are displayed simply and effectively on pleasingly spartan pages with clear but unobtrusive navigation. There are three groupings (plus a press/bio section which I’m ducking till this is done and dusted), *Architecture Paintings 2005-9*, *Landscapes 2006-9* and *Landscapes 2010-11*. The titles are accurate, except last to appear in *Landscapes 2006-9* is an apparently photorealist portrait of the musician (now academic) Franz Pritchard. This is the sole direct human presence in any of the works displayed (though humans a plenty are implied by



Dealer acrylic on canvas 36" x 36" 2008

courtesy the artist and Gregory Lind Gallery, San Francisco, CA

their vehicles, shops and other buildings). The portrait appears to be a fine one, rich in the sense of a unique human presence, but, and this is a real problem, the image is on the small side - the content we read easily. Harder to assess is any of the business leading to it.

Within each heading some sequences are subtitled *California* and *East Coast Parking Lots*. Most of the works are titled functionally – *Steakhouse*, *Small Campus* and *Hotels*. Or by what I assume is a location – *Bennington* and *Litchfield*. Occasionally a feature is picked out – *Aspens*, *Small Town In-Ground* (refers to a kind of swimming pool - no, I didn't know either). Or an embryonic narrative is suggested – *Overstock and Dealer*. On the whole, the titles of recent works take a turn to the cryptic and some carry no title but simply dimensions. On which note, the vast majority of the pieces in all categories are square, or near square in format, ranging from the smallest at 12 x 12 cm to 72 x 68 cm. The pieces up to 2010 are uniformly executed in acrylic, the latest in oil, with a bridging set in both media.

A first pass at the subject matter might be the currently fashionable 'edgelands', although that doesn't quite do it. It's more the offices, hotels, malls, leisure facilities and parking lots that creep swiftly in as those edgelands are re-developed, where waste, decay and disorder are supplanted by something as atmospheric, and perhaps even more unheimlich in its now lovingly manicured desolation. But look closely at the plants and the shadows within these landscapes. They are the most carefully and lovingly depicted things there, somehow much more concrete in the sense of their individuality. This poetic individuation moves me in a quite visceral and primitive way - something to do with childhood.

The portrait aside, just one other picture strains away from the

general austerity and suggests a narrative. In *Dealer* we are in a wasteland proper. In the foreground are a few abandoned pipes. A car lurks almost directly underneath a completely deserted flyover from which bizarrely multi-coloured bunting hangs, and one feels that bad things could well be happening in it, or just out of frame. Patches of grass, and some rather beautiful white shrubs, all but obscure distant hills, and there is the suggestion of a figure at the left car door – a suggestion.

It's a pleasure to discern a distinct echo of early Ruscha in Longstreth's work. I've felt for a long time that the photographic series *26 Gas Stations* has been too long under-rated as one of the most beautiful art works of the Sixties - a layer of conceptual cool, exemplified in a tendentious settling of accounts/self promotions, such as Jeff Wall's *Marks of Indifference*, acting as a barrier to a more widespread acknowledgement of this simple truth.

The earliest featured work here draws on both a seriality, and to some extent the type of content of early Ruscha (note again the sub-sequence of East Coast parking lots) with a whatever-the-nine-fold-equivalent-of-a-diptych is, of various video stores entitled, in a does-what-it-says-on-the-tin tip of the hat to Conceptualism - *Video Stores: Nine Examples*. The square format of each work is re-duplicated in the layout of the piece as a whole. Within each piece there is emptiness on the distinctively shaped and angled sign where one would expect to find the store name. It isn't simply that Longstreth and others have picked up in painting what Ruscha started in photography. The cool abstraction of previously unremarked beauty from the everyday was a direction Ruscha the painter appeared to be heading to with *Standard Stations* and others before he was lured away by typography. Despite the apparent triumph of text he has never



Idaho Falls acrylic on panel 36" x 36" 2006

Courtesy the artist and GregoryLind Gallery, San Francisco, CA

completely abandoned this kind of depiction – his 2005 *The Old Trade School Building* descends directly from this early work by way of 1992 *Blue Collar Trade School*.

Longstreth's pictures of buildings and landscapes continue and develop a line of stylization and simplification. They often suggest (suggest; this by no means exhausts them) those architectural images of how the mall or office development will look. They lack only the motion blurred or semi-transparent figures. But I want to return to those plants and shadows. Both stand out, in different ways. The shadows are sharp, precise and imply a kind of dreamlike De Chiricoesque light. The plants, trees and flowers stand in sharp contrast to both the precision of the shadows and the generality of the architectural-visualisation of the buildings - in both cases, supported by the distinct clarity and crispness particularly native to acrylic paint. The vegetation is blurry, smudgy. In the same way that the portrait of Franz Prichard conjures a specific and quite unique human being, we seem to have in each case a portrait of a specific and quite unique stretch of flora, reaching a particularly fetching zenith in *Mount Diablo Foliage* and *Walnut Creek* - the handling of the paint loosening, giving way, blurring, just that little bit, in the context of such otherwise fierce austerity, enough to sing out to us. (And I'm going to be both teleological and anthropomorphic and suggest that all the time the foliage of Longstreth's work is yearning to be rendered in juicy and smudgy oils, a wish that, as we will see, will be granted.)

So far, so good. The early works feature haunting scenes, very much to our late Twentieth/early Twenty First Century taste - a sort of clinical sublime, heightened further by that hyper-real treatment of shadow and the contrasting

close attention to plants, trees and shrubs. And these works alone would be enough to detain and engage us. They are rich, odd and intelligent. Where I get excited, as well as admire, is with the change of direction in the latest works. I say change of direction, though there is nothing that is not firmly grounded in what has gone before; it's more that conclusions are fearlessly drawn – 'what if' pursued, and this is reflected in both the media used and in their handling.

Stuff is simplified. The world is sublimed. Things blur in a way that can only be called organic. Mysterious patches of paint (now oil rather than acrylic, by way of a period of using both together) appear and there is ambiguity about whether these elements are representational, expressionistic or formal (or all three).

The focus on landscape and architecture remains, but although a line of descent is clear from the earlier work, these new landscapes have more of an explicit 'inner' about them. The work is now expressionistic to the extent that the handling encodes a visceral response to the ostensible subject, which sometimes almost dissolves. Vegetation, hills, clouds, earth, all hum with a kind of vitalist charge, while the palette, never exactly naturalistic, becomes deliciously eccentric, now austere restricted, now lurching into a species of neo-Fauvism. It's early in Longstreth's career. He has already assembled a substantial and formidable body of work. There's a restlessness evidenced by the story so far which bodes well.



Untitled (Primordial Valley) oil on canvas 24" x 18" 2011

Courtesy of the artist