

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Pink uncertain landscape

Kate Timney

The show's title, *CATATONIA* derives from the Greek *kata* (down) and *tons* (tension or tones). We use it to describe a state of immobility or uncontrolled movement, where the mind is active while the body goes elsewhere and leaves the resident thinker behind.

down - tension / tension - down / down - tones

The word presses: presses flowers dry, pins butterflies, holds the dreamer fixed like night terror or somnambulism. A symptom of catatonia is *echolalia*, where a motion or word is revisited, again and again without conscious control.

When Jack opens his studio door I am surprised by the scale of the paintings. A lot of people say that, apparently. Not the large canvases that I had assumed (they contain marks that seem to track broad arcs of movement and poured materials) but in fact delicate pieces of wood with Tom Thumb figures in scenes the size of tiles, most of them no bigger than two palms spread open. And they sheen like tiles in slanting light. You could carry the smallest ones in a pocket, like the little sentimental ovals, delicately painted, framed in black, that the Victorians made to capture a person; to carry them along and make of the feeling between them a talisman.

A round smooth thing in a pocket is good. Something to run a thumb over, that brings you down to ground.

The resin on Jack's paintings protects them, placing them inside a glossy shell. Jack is at his best when the resin starts to resist as he paints, as it moves and his image warps and he battles to give it anchor in place and to fix it to the spot. Where the paintings are leaned upright to dry, the image drags itself long with the weight of its form and colour. When laid to dry flat, so that all that surface can be sealed as though behind glass, as though pressed between the panes of a slide to be approached by eye-through-lens, the figure is made still. The resin mounds, surface rounds, makes an ever-so-slightly three-dimensional space that is not quite a stage – there's not much room to move - but that is not quite flat either.

To hold a moment at the scale of an open palm: there is a sentimentality that comes with the miniature. Jack grapples with the idea that his work could be called *twee*. Maybe it's the care inherent in rendering form so closely, eye drawn near to the surface, stark record of each tremble in the hand. And then there's the sweetness of it all, yellows and pinks that waver or drench, these candied rich colours that push realness away. Yes the paintings are pretty, tinged with nostalgia, and sprinkled with kitsch (sometimes, almost - *cute*?) but always they are cut through by a too-much-ness, hard to place, that jars with sweetness. In *Honey lung* the lacy texture of alveoli droops into a pink, uncertain landscape, as bows of tree or sky that hang above a couple who stand and look towards us. Saccharine, heavy, about to crush. Then *Swarms of Sugar*: a woman stands and breathes the scent of flowers that look like mouths or iced cakes, while behind her all the flora swims and dances, melting in the heat or blowing in a wind that doesn't touch her.

And the sugar cloys to the feeling that we have tasted it before. The rot-sweet scent of it echoes.

Images present like archetypes, like moments misremembered and collaged until they are universalised, or made cinematic. Beautiful, bittersweet. Most of the time we're never close enough to

make out the details of a face and so they invite projection and prompt a feeling of need or else detachment. We are seeing moments of transfixion, wonder, tenderness or tedium; seeing all of this from the outside where looking becomes a reaching, yearning thing. Denis Diderot, often labelled the first art critic, asserted that paintings should not depict fixed sitters, posed for a viewer but should be full of characters who inhabit a life of their own complete with purpose and narrative and wayward feeling. He said that as with theatre, a viewer might feel that they could turn away and the painting would go on without them. In Jack's work there is theatre, but the characters seem quiet and still, as though not in a play but in a photograph of one where an action has begun that will not be consummated.

Or perhaps it has not begun but has started to be dreamed.

There is something delicately unconvincing in these scenes that are conscious of their status as paintings, where representation is unsettled by the materiality of paints and varnishes troubling the surface. They are paintings of the distance that any image creates and the gulf from reality that a picture becomes the moment it is made. And so the painting performs itself, always a veiling, a texture out of place, an awkwardness. Amy Tillman asks what are we painting when we sit, so earnest, in our studios, trying to make something worthy. It's not beauty we're after, she says, but 'this fragile thing called awkwardness'.¹ Pictures to spin out this feeling of transfixed alienation, to look and process, to churn. Jack fixes a fiction to the spot and holds it in silent wonder, turns it over, sticks with it.

People and places hang in suspended unreality and everybody seems to be waiting, quietly.

This unreality compels and speaks in echoes: to lockdown moments of outsidersness; to the way that we build life into fictions; the ways that we write and rewrite and undo. Compels like seeing yourself as a character in a dream, or a dream that you know is a dream and you fight to stay asleep. Like this the paintings offer little open windows, to characters in an elsewhere-dream-space that is poignant and strange. Where you can see yourself from behind, from outside, from far away.

¹ Amy Silman, "Shit Happens: Notes on Awkwardness", *Frieze*, Issue 22, November 2015, <https://www.frieze.com/article/shit-happens>.