

There's something terrible about reality and I don't know what it is.

Giuliana in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*

The heroine of Antonioni's first colour film *Red Desert* (1964), is afraid of streets, factories, people and colours. Colour is applied carefully in the film, as in a painting. The chemical yellows, reds and blues are placed against muted monotone. Parts of the set were actually hand painted, in dusty off-whites and gray, to emphasise this staging, like Morandi hand-painting the surfaces of objects he set as still lifes. Distances are blurred and brought back into focus—at the edge of the city concrete cooling towers and refineries emerge from classical lines of pine trees, but it can be hard to separate the two. Italian pastoral gives way to industrial wasteland where sulphur yellow smoke, orange containers or silvery curves of pipelines are the new visual solace.

Sight Deserted. The title of Tony Swain's show implies a similar abandonment. Ostensible landscapes that break up and reconfigure themselves on old ground, where you must look and look again, making your own way through. Abandon is both desolation and delight.

The large paintings invoke the format of traditional landscape, European horizontals and Japanese vertical. But Arcadian reverie is interrupted by rips and gaps, the merging of paint and paper disrupted by tearing marks of paint itself. The printed image provides points of precision, anchorings of implied detail. A railway leads to a distance. Its sweep could echo J. M. W. Turner's industrial ecstasy *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844) but this track is reverting to grass, not driving forward to a future. In the long vertical painting *Page, not one gap*, recognisable markers, viaducts, bridges and towers, give way to a space where the paintbrush makes the sound, and nervous green lit arches of pushed paint look like a sample from El Greco's views of Toledo. The illusion of a viewpoint gives way to a more fluid space in which many fragments are afloat, but spatial orientation is uncertain.

These abandoned sites are full to overflowing, deserts of detritus after civilisation, full of the leavings of that civilisation, the daily detail of newspaper images merging and re-emerging into a half-remembered landscape. The pandemic and climate crisis in which these paintings were made are reiterations of old destructions: Antonioni's *Red Desert* was set in an industrially poisoned environment where the rivers and air have become toxic and an epidemic looms. Six hundred years before, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's great landscape fresco *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government* (1339) presages the imminent Black Death and ensuing civic disaster. There is nothing new. Antonioni told Mark Rothko, 'Your paintings are just like my films, they're about nothing... with precision.'¹ The precision part is true, for nothing, you could read everything.

Collage/Compose. The paintings are put together from propositions. One thing, then

another. Composition—*com-poser* is putting together in the literal French. Side by side to incite and disrupt, vibrate or intensify pitch. Seduction of the eye is interrupted by a gap or obtrusion—don't get too cosy. Interruptions accentuate memory traces, the flash of a remembered image or painting, distant or close up. Swain also makes musical compositions. Painting and music are closer to each other than to writing; an articulation of space without words, an attempt to make space respond by inflecting emptiness, this to this to this.

An Italianate tower is juxtaposed with Vorticist merry-go-rounds, the space goes in and out, with rips of Venetian red newsprint, the colour of traditional underpainting. A raft of jam and cream buns, that register as smiling false teeth, floats downstream. A leathery arm is a cliff that could make you think Breughel, then Dali's deliquescence. A concrete slope leads up to a bed like a stage set, the bed levels into a distant sea, a dream sequence, emerging from smoke, topped with a surrealist shell.

Newspapers are increasingly read on screens. So the paperiness of newsprint, like the paint of paintings, has become a perversity that persists. At the start of this millennium, Leon Golub spoke of painters being like cockroaches, who could survive even a nuclear fallout: 'they're very hard to tread on, they keep coming back'.² Painting is obstinate, it keeps coming back—like cockroaches, like rubbish, a material presence that insinuates itself as strongly as the discontents we discard in pursuit of "civilisation". Return of the repressed—it comes back stronger.

In *Act Miscast* a nuclear winter tree grows out of a sea of discarded papers. Bare branches are crowned by another cloud of papery rubbish and white search lights burn holes. The sea of papers is like the landscape of newspaper mounds in the artist's studio, the site from which the paintings have emerged over the last two decades. The studio interior makes me think of Ilya Kabakov's vast cosmic rubbish dump evoked in *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988):

The whole world, everything which surrounds me, is to me a boundless dump with no ends or borders, an inexhaustible, diverse sea of rubbish. In this refuse of an enormous city one can feel the powerful breathing of its entire past. The whole dump is full of sparks, twinkling stars, reflections and fragments of culture: either some kind of books, or a sea of magazines with photographs and texts, or things once used by someone...

The paper sea is also a deluge, a flood, with all the end of civilisation resonance you like—a mass of traces in which it is no longer possible to distinguish what is of value, so that everything must be kept:

And this feeling of a unity of all that past life that these objects still hold and at the same time the feeling of the separateness of its components, gives birth to an image... maybe it's an image of certain civilisations slowly sinking under the pressure of unknown cataclysms but in which nevertheless some sort of events are taking place.

The refuse of what has been lived through could suffocate, if not for the chance of something surfacing from the burial. Compost becomes compose:

*A dump not only devours everything, preserving it forever, but one might say it also continually generates something: some kind of shoots, stems, ideas... hopes for the rebirth of something, although it is well-known that all of this will be covered over with new layers of rubbish.*³

Put this beside an old scrap torn from T.S. Eliot's collage-composed *The Waste Land* (1922):

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images [...]*

The heaps of newspaper in the studio, gently yellowing and gathering dust, shifting slightly over years to release images which suddenly surface, and suggest themselves, are torn out and take part in new paintings. *Some sort of events are taking place*, and painting, tearing, putting together, sets this in motion.

Liza Dimpleby, November 2022

¹ Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni, or the Surface of the World* (University of California Press, 1985), p. 54.

² Timothy Hyman, *The World New Made* (Thames and Hudson, 2016), p. 237.

³ Extracts (my revised translation) from Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988); first published in English in Ilya Kabakov: *Ten Characters* (Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1989) reprinted in Boris Groys, David A. Ross, Iwona Blazwick, *Ilya Kabakov* (Phaidon Press, 1998) pp. 99-103.