

TURPS

Featuring
Andy Holden on Phil Root

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PHIL
ROOT
A BRIEF
GUIDE FOR
TOURISTS
BY
ANDY
HOLDEN

In the past, my contribution for Turps has always been in the form of interviews. In this case, I have had a dialogue with Phil Root for several years and felt it might be best to just attempt to explore some of the recent developments in Root's painting, as quite often what I find compelling about one of Root's paintings, and what he tells me about it, are quite at odds.

There is a responsibility in knowing that this will be the first text to appear about a painter who's work, which although at times very precise, thrives on an ambiguity of subject matter, and I'm hesitant to say anything too definite, to attempt to do more than set the tone. Hopefully this text will function as a guide for the newly arrived tourist, a suggestion of things to look out for, although sometimes, of all the artists I know, this work is the least in need of any explanation. In Huxley's wonderful *Meditation on El Greco* he describes arriving in Spain without a guidebook, and the way that this allows him to encounter the country afresh, with a joyful ignorance, no need to ask why or what for. There can be a similar joy in an encounter with a painting by Root, found hanging in a bathroom or above a sink, the painting acquiring an extra power, a

sense of surprise. These brief notes will attempt to unravel how that surprise might function, and note the things that have caught my attention as a repeated visitor to Root's painted territory.

It is an old guidebook, dating from around 1911, which provided Root's starting point for the most recent exhibition, *Still Life with Lemons* at Hidde van Seggelen gallery. Root had at this time taken up residence in a caravan on the edge of Dartmoor where he was to spend the next few months living, painting, and preparing for this exhibition. The out-dated tourist guide, belonging once to his grandfather, was used to plot his paths across the moor, perhaps, as the things that interest him now, and often find themselves in the paintings, will not be effected by the passage of a mere one hundred years. With the recent constellation of canvases, ranging from the small, intimate Avery-like landscapes with their painted frames, to the larger thinner, layered, images that bring to mind Rene Daniels, there is a complex set of personal, methodological, and idiosyncratic narratives that account for each one's existence. However, so wildly different is each reason, from the highly personal image painted as a memorial, to the chance encounter with a wooden pattern, to an image from a natural history book, that as a viewer any chance of following these threads has to be abandoned. A summary of the works gathered together would have to be an account of each and every painting, each bound to the other only through the painter, and the painter's proximity to the landscape in which he finds himself, wandering with only an outdated guide book for assistance.

So what of the paintings themselves? Stylistically the works are hard to place. At times they remind me of some of my favourite charity shop finds, the recent painting of a beach ball, cryptically titled *Egg Within a Ball*, with its wooden frame, has all the power of a



Above: **Diamond Shelf**
2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
(40 x 60 cm)

Top right:

Bottom right: **Egg With A Ball**
2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
(26 x 20.5 cm)

All courtesy of the artist
and Hidde Van Seggelen, London

Brim
1999
Acrylic on canvas
(61 x 46cm)

Courtesy of the artist





Seven Birds (after Pennant)
2010
Oil on canvas
2010

Courtesy of the artist
and Hidde Van Seggelen, London

painting I bought from a house-clearance in Deptford, with the context in which it is found, the way in which it is framed, the sense of surprise at having found it, all being inseparable from the painting itself. The painting is an object, handled, a block of intensity, equal to a tea-pot or a ceramic plate commemorating the jubilee. It has a curious mix of seeming like a very domestic painting, on a domestic scale, but each time the title sends me off towards Duchamp's assisted readymade *With Hidden Noise*, the ball of twine with a mysterious object hidden out of sight from the viewer, only hinted at in the title and through the objects' rattle. Talking to Root however, as is customary, I couldn't be further from the image's intention. The painting was the product of a painting of a birds' egg that whilst thinking about Breugel, mutated into a ball. There is always something curious that however definite the reason for the existence of one of the paintings, it seems irrelevant to the image one is confronted by, with the painting attaining a status as something else altogether, autonomous, that no longer needs its causes or process in order to exist. Often have I found myself immersed in an object or landscape of a Phil Root painting, hesitating to give a name to the thing found there, for Root to break the spell with a simple, "oh, that's just a..." and back down to earth I come, the thing being something so common and of this world that the only marvel is that he should have bothered to paint it at all. There is with these paintings more than most a great gulf between cause and effect, an irrevocable discrepancy between the intention put in and the thing that is then found there.

Sometimes I find Milton Avery a useful reference, part of the history of painting but little to do with its development. There is a similar discrepancy between what interested Avery, what he seems to be painting, and the colour, composition, and cropping

that ends up captivating the viewer. With Avery his place in the history of painting seems irrelevant, the biography unnecessary, all that matters is each painting's intensity and difference, the ability to depict an arrangement on a table as if it could be no other way. It is a similar ambiguous precision that is found in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, described by Simon Critchley in *Things Merely Are* (2005) as a sudden rightness, an act of depiction that allows one to see the thing in a way that couldn't be other than the way it quite suddenly appears.

The title of Root's exhibition, *Still Life with Lemons*, was for me strangely wrong. It could have been the title of the previous show, which as well as including a still life painting of a lemon, primarily consisted of still life paintings. *Still Life With Lemons* saw a shift in Root's subject matter, becoming instead completely absorbed by landscape, trees, rafts, birds, beaches, minerals and mythology. Lemons did feature, like a thread between shows, but the use of the object now seemed closer to the lemon found on the wooden chest in Kettles Yard house, an alien form, an exotic yellow curiosity, placed on view as if of equal fascination as any Henry Moore or Ben Nicholson. For *Still Life With Lemons*, instead of appearing in a painting, the fruit motif was seen sliced and dropped into a stream, displayed on a highly coloured video loop shown on an old monitor placed upon a wooden raft like structure in the centre of the gallery. The exaggerated colours and slow electronic soundtrack attempting a tone close to Jodorowski's *The Holy Mountain* or Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Probably the most useful analogy and point of context are the assemblages of Paul Thek, with their mix of big, mystical themes (Arc, Pyramid, Easter etc) and the way they sit along side Thek's painterly landscapes. However, with Root it is always a bit more shop window, a touch



Above: **Arrangement With Boules**
2010
Oil on canvas
(61 x 45 cm)



Left: **The Natural History Of Selbourne**
2010
Oil on canvas
(56.5 x 40.5 cm)

Both courtesy of the artist
and Hidde Van Seggelen, London



Interior With Stick
2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
(152 x 91 cm)

Courtesy of the artist
and Hidde Van Seggelen, London

more Habitat, an intense awareness of the close proximity between nature and culture, a sense of any utopian impulse being weighed up against its possible assimilation into commercial culture.

Root's first solo exhibition, which went without a title, was primarily concerned with still life. The method and tone of the paintings brought to mind Italo Calvino's set of lectures *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, with his proposition of a set a virtues that for him linked all the important writers of the Twentieth Century, a set of values that could be carried forward into the future. These values of lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity, are all things to be found in this series of still life paintings. From the ghostly painting of a book with blank pages laid open, *The Large Page*, to the comic, Bazelitz-ish *Large Jug*, the paintings were simultaneously paintings of things and things themselves, chunky and unequivocally there. As with the most recent exhibition the paintings exist in a myriad of other objects, tentative sculptures, more like uncongealed temporary assemblages that cut up the gallery, real objects in space that provide a décor, an interior design for the paintings to be viewed in. Propped up paintings made with oil on glass were titled *For Frances Picabia*, but it was the placement of the sim-cards on breeze blocks next to pot-plants, tiny ugly objects that had a clarity and precision that was akin to Cathy Wilkes' assemblages. They have an unnerving ability to often make you see for the first time something that until now had seemed to exist without any possibility of being transformed into an object of contemplation. Calvino's set of values all seemed present in the handling of the paint. Each work is painted in a single sitting with hardly a pause to clean the brushes between colours, the result being an immediacy and precision of thought. When Calvino discusses the use of objects

in literature, focusing on Robinson Crusoe, it has an odd similarity to the way an object is encountered in a painting by Root: "the helmet becomes a barbers bowl, but it does not lose importance or meaning... the moment an object appears in a narrative it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field, a knot in the network of invisible relationships... we might even say that in a narrative any object is magic."

There was also an in-between show, a small scale solo presentation of Phil Roots paintings, in the back room of Hidde van Seggelen's old gallery, the converted bathroom space in Jermyn Street. It was a show of paintings based on Tarot cards, which in some way provide the bridge from these still life works to this new set of paintings. Cards as objects, objects that could have a magical power, but also remain curious cultural artefacts. However, as tempting as it would be to trace this in terms of the spiritual development, a movement away from the influence of Morandi and towards a new-found interest in mysticism, it is the formal device of the painted frame, which first appeared in the card paintings, that is the most striking result to have come from this curious deviation. The loose, formal paintings of the Tarot cards all had an approximate border painted on to the canvas, taken from the design on the card. The landscape paintings seem to have inherited decorative borders, which are in this case an approximation of the wooden patterns of Tunbridge Ware, rendered in a folk-like painterly fashion. They seem to bypass any bother with Derridean frame within a frame referencing and somehow instead focus the image, an odd mix of Howard Hodgkin and Bloomsbury decoration that place it out of time, imbed it with narrative possibilities, placing it in a network of fast, precise, multiple relationships.

This patterned border is most clearly seen in the painting *A Natural History of Selbourne*, the painting that had the most direct relationship with another key source for the exhibition, the book of the same title written by Gilbert White and published in 1789. For Root this early piece of natural history writing remains crucial, with its emphasis on observation, recording what one sees but without yet knowing why this is of interest, or why one feels compelled to represent these things. Before Darwin and the discovery that observations of natural history can produce vast conceptual changes, there was just a feeling that someone ought to make note of these things, that it might at a latter date have some other value, and it is this feeling that we get from Root's paintings. They make it seem important that we look at this nest, these trees, this jug, this lemon, but without knowing as yet why or what for. They want to be looked at outside of the chain of causes, encountered afresh in their sudden rightness, loaded with a multiplicity of possibilities, each painting transforming the viewer into a tourist, seeing something that elsewhere might seem familiar, as if it is being seen for the very first time.



Bastion of Empire (Mocha, Summer Fruits, Butterscotch etc) - Andy Holden
2010
Emulsion of brown paper
(115 x 75 cm)

Courtesy of the artist

