

The Yellow Paper

1



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5

As if*: an editorial
Laura Edbrook

11

Laurence Figgis
Paintings with Legs

17

Kate Briggs
A bit, a piece, a thing, a twin

23

Esther Draycott
1979, Women's style in four objects

29

Calum Sutherland
Departure of Biography (for Lei Yamabe)

35

Daisy Lafarge
Cliché is the sediment of sentiment that collects in my ear

38

Kiah Endelman Music
She had found her world in touch and found it (so) uncomfortable

45

Imogen Harland
Homepage: Design and Desire

53

Alison Scott
A stain, a sting

59

Susannah Thompson
After (After)

65

Clare Patterson
By landscape we also mean memory

73

Rosie Roberts
Hey Blue, did you ever know, I would do this?

78

Sarah Diviney
Kathleen



Laurence Figgis, *The General*, 2017,
dye-sublimation print on canvas, 200 x 141 cm

After (After) Susannah Thompson

In February 2003, the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell made an official statement to the Council and the international media on the decision to invade Iraq. Behind him, on the wall of the anteroom to the UN Security Council Chamber, hung one of a number of full-size tapestry copies of Picasso's *Guernica* by Jacqueline de la Baume Dürrbach. The image was deemed an 'inappropriate' backdrop to this formal announcement and was quickly covered over with a blue curtain. The episode—the veiling of politically-loaded imagery which both prefigured the destruction to come as well as memorialising another, earlier twentieth century atrocity—became emblematic. *Guernica*-inspired imagery was subsequently used on countless placards in the marches and gatherings held in opposition to the invasion. The re-appropriation of *Guernica* in this way, as a horribly ironic political allegory, is apposite in considering the critical intentions underpinning Laurence Figgis' exhibition (*After After*). Evolving from an interest in art historical citation, and, specifically, the strategic use of anachronism, the works are concerned with the way the past becomes the present, again, and ever after.

The artist's research for (*After After*) was informed by two bodies of work produced in the late 1950s: Pablo Picasso's 1957 series of paintings after Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) and Robert Rauschenberg's 1958-60 drawings illustrating the thirty-four cantos of Dante's *Inferno* (1308-1320). Along with

Picasso and Rauschenberg, other visual sources include the work of British illustrator Eric Winter, known primarily for his contributions to Ladybird Books' *Well-Loved Tales*, and the US painter Eyvind Earle, who worked for Walt Disney, amongst others. Figgis' figurative paintings and digital prints implicitly ask how mid-twentieth century and post-war visual culture might inform contemporary narrative painting. How might we look to these works as reference points for current anxieties about technological progress, social inequality, gender and sexual politics? Following Picasso's Cubist take on Velásquez's painting, Figgis' own works similarly aim to generate a critical dialogue between art of the past and present. In looking back to earlier historical periods, the works simultaneously speak to their own, particular moment in history.

The reflection of Cold War-era politics through the lens of historical allegory in the works by Picasso and Rauschenberg forms the basis for Figgis' own imaginative fiction, a cross-genre narrative referencing gothic romance, dystopian literature and fairy tales. Employing *anachorism* as well as *anachronism*, the settings of these works could be amalgams of Picasso/Velásquez's Royal Court, Rauschenberg/Dante's Hell and the fairy tale worlds of Winter and Earle. The courts, kings and queens of Figgis' tale also echo the speculative fictional worlds of the Glasstown Confederacy, Angria and Gondal, those settings of Brontë juvenilia which teem with duplicitous political scheming, *coup d'états*, and intrigue. If the island colonies of the Brontë children's books and poems can be read as fictional parallels to the Empire-building events of the 1820s and 30s, the spaces in *(After) After* are intended as more deliberate, satirical comments on contemporary culture, in all of its dark, kitsch incongruity.

In their variations of *Las Meninas* and Dante's *Inferno*, Picasso and Rauschenberg saw historical appropriation as a way to satirise or respond to the present. Before Picasso, Francisco Goya's 1778 etching of *Las Meninas* and his 1801 painting *Charles IV of Spain and His Family* depicted an altogether less sympathetic portrait of royalty than its source, considered to be a satirical jibe at the corruption and decay of the royal family (a painting

within the painting shows the biblical figure of Lot and his daughters). For his part, Picasso's court of King Phillip IV of Spain points to 1950s Spain under Franco, an arch-monarchist, while Rauschenberg's evocation of Dante's Hell was composed of mass-media imagery in the age of McCarthyism and the Cold War. In Figgis' work, a similar agenda is at play. In *The Mar'ge* (2017), a royal procession is seen through cleaned-for-the-Queen, blood-red pillars, the crowds in shadow, an anonymous prole throng. A foxed, tarnished present is reflected back to us in the gaudy gilt objects of *After the Mar'ge* (2017), ripe for the bonfire of the vanities in Austerity Britain. Amongst the tableware, an image of a rocket, rendered in ice-cream colours, decorates the dinner plate of sinister papal figure. The image of *The General* (2017), could have been lifted from Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, but equally this heavy automaton figure could be a latter-day iron maiden, a metal burka for men, a contemporary Pharisee, a suit of armour for a paranoid dictator. *The Club-Grande* (2017) is part Versailles, part Met Ball, and surrounded, everywhere, by watchful eyes, Rhianna meets *La Reine Margot*. Velásquez and Picasso's Infanta becomes *The Goddess of Land Services* (2017) in architectonic, draggy crinoline. All of these works could be read as allegory: what was once deemed stupid, reactionary, even implausible in this day and age is, once again, political fact. Then and now, the 'Right Force' is frequently ushered in and made possible by 'seductive pageantry'¹.

Bad Retail, Figgis' prose-romance, was produced in parallel to the paintings and prints in (*After*) *After*. Seen together, the verbal and visual elements become a kind of contemporary illuminated manuscript, populated by characters who appear across both narrative forms. In its written form, the language of political spin and *corporatese* is taken to Dada-esque extremes—protagonists speak in an argot populated by buzzwords, in-jokes and neologisms recognisable to any institutional or academic worker disorientated by committee-speak and acronymic dialogue. A bureaucratic nightmare, akin to a phone call to the city council, communication in *Bad Retail* is bound up by labyrinthine codes.

1 Laurence Figgis, 'Bad Retail: A Prose-Romance', *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, (London: Intellect, 2017)

Figgis' tale also refers to the authoritarian language of classic dystopian narratives by Ursula Le Guin, George Orwell or Anthony Burgess. If, in Figgis' work, 'the tyrant becomes an administrator'² the pompous patois of admin is used to extreme comedic effect—the embedded, decontextualized fragments of Glaswegian dialect, Figgis' adopted city, are cases in point.

The text, like the visual works, constitutes an act of pillaging and self-plagiarism: references to earlier works in the artist's oeuvre are manifold. Through his verbal and visual forms, 'full of tell-tale fault lines and stitches'³, Figgis has sought to dramatise the equivalence of collage to anachronism, using the fractures and glitches created by both ways of working to foster a reading of 'period' costume, setting or speech which acts in the same push/pull manner as flatness in Modernist painting: can we be in both places at once? Are we *here* or *there*?

—

(*After*) *After*, a solo exhibition by Laurence Figgis, was held at Leeds College of Art in Summer 2017, curated by Dr Catriona McAra

2 Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (expanded edition), (New York: Free Press, 1991), p 255

3 Figgis, *op cit*.