

**ANY LIGHT PASSING THRU SETS FIRE TO MY EYES.
A REETROSPECTIVE**

NEAL TAIT

10/02 - 02/03

Chain Reactions: On Neal Tait

Midway through *Neal Tait* (Other Criteria, 2006), nestled among the reproductions, is a photograph of the artist as a young punk musician: hair black and softly spiky, striped shirt ripped, a steel skull-and-crossbones on his lapel. He and his compatriots are in a dressing room or a rehearsal space, and there's a handwritten injunction on the wall to keep the room clean. Under that, someone has scrawled a response: FUCK THE ROOM. It isn't simply in the book for nostalgic purposes, this inclusion. It's a nudge and a guide through the mutable painted imagery that surrounds it; shorthand, too, for a certain kind of stance—and a trans- historical one—vis-à-vis cultural activity.

The year before *Neal Tait* was published, the filmmaker/musician Don Letts put out *Punk: Attitude*, a documentary that, downplaying 1976-78 in favour of an expanded timeline from the Velvet Underground and the 60s to Nirvana and the 1990s, posits punk as less a fixed style than a mode of contrarian cognition. (In this, it follows the expansive model set by Greil Marcus's survey of modernist negation, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, 1989.) The DVD of Letts' film contains a facsimile of the first issue of *Sniffin' Glue*, the legendary punk fanzine; and Tait's own first artistic activity, he says, was in making similar hand-cut and photocopied punk graphics. And so how he first learned to jigsaw imagery together—to feel discontinuities buzzing in 2D space, something from here next to something from there making a bigger third thing—is inextricable from punk-as-attitude, from a certain instinctively uprooting, improvisatory mindset. Let's see if we can get back to there from here.

Among Tait's new paintings are several that take as a submerged motif the inverted figure in Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* (1570-76): the body near-abstracted, reduced to a couple of stacked, bow-limbed diamond shapes, glimmering through a rough modernist grid. The body is semi-transparent and the geometry is windowlike and colourfully infilled, gesturing towards stained glass. The handling is raw, febrile. In another painting, a lachrymose head materialises out of cubistic curves against a beachy backdrop dotted with trees: it's sunlit and sad, controlled and rough. What's classically Tait about these paintings is that they pull things from what feel like disparate regions of a spectrum of images and, colliding them, entrain a complexly mood-driven strangeness. Things that theoretically don't go together go together and fibrillate, and we could jump straight back to the fanzines and the paste-up board now but the trajectory is more circuitous than that.

In the late 1980s and early 90s, when Tait was an art student, the model for painting was the implicitly melancholy patchwork of postmodernism, with its assumption that all remained to do was to recycle, more or less interestingly, what had gone before: to close painting's coffin from within. But if postmodernism itself was a reaction—one with arrant presumptions of finality—how to react *against* a reaction without effecting some kind of conservative volte-face? The trajectory Tait has increasingly followed is one that certainly—perhaps inevitably—draws on the combinatorial logic of po-mo, but does so in a comparatively libidinal way that bespeaks a certain truth about his medium which theory-driven painting would rather avoid, or never arrives at. That it is bigger, stranger, deeper than any constructs one might try and reduce it to; that if you bunker down in the studio long enough, you'll paint past rationality and armatures and into gradations of tone that only painting can access. Tait's way of going there, to hear him tell it, involves the freewheeling consumption of diverse image-hoards—stacks of photocopies, featuring anything from body-based photojournalism to art-historical fragments, litter his studio—and then a kind of notation of the imagery that steals upon the mind's eye on the edge of sleep, in which the scads of pictures are processed, sorted, weirdly combined. The result admits

that, post-postmodernism, new images are indebted to the immeasurable archive of old ones, but which still asserts—unlike postmodernism—that those images *can* be new; that there are boundless cocktails of affect waiting in seemingly the driest gulches.

In one recent painting, for example, Tait twists a Picasso-style figure into a kind of rich anatomical origami—all long pyramidal forms and horns—but then gifts it with a stenographic face of authentic sadness. Imperatives, here, visibly clash: the nostalgic desire to burrow into the past versus the knowledge that one can't and leading to the desire to screw merrily with old aesthetics; the sense that certain historical figures can't be evaded and can't be emulated either. In another canvas, where avowed echoes of Iggy Pop and Mick Ronson interweave with the *Marsyas* imagery and pale bare legs slump across the base of the canvas, the painting's coherence comes not from the intersection of imagery but from a thousand micro-decisions about how to pull the instinctively arraigned parts together while holding closure at bay. The result, as in Tait's best art, has an autonomous and resistant life, a surety in its oddity, a feeling of having exceeded the conscious designs of its maker. It's a kind of golem, an outcrop of black arts; and so it's perhaps not irrelevant that Tait has been looking at Aleister Crowley's paintings recently.

For the viewer, though—as with the various games of looking Tait sets up, his insertion of figures into voyeuristic windowed spaces or his lasting obsession with eyes—the idea that paint can make something that *lives* might bring us back to the idea that the overarching subject of this work is, still and again, painting itself. Or, rather, painting as process. Note that Tait, of late, has begun painting in acrylic. That's partly for speed, and the need for speed is evocative of an artist's desire to change up his practice—which, in turn, takes us back to a specific composition of thinking. The Ur-document of punk is, of course, a single exchange in John Paxton and Bill Maddow's script for *The Wild One* (1953): “Johnny, what are you rebelling against?” “Whuddya got?” In Tait's case, and perhaps for all perceptive painters of his generation, the first answer to the interlocutor's question might be—to put it in cartoonishly simple terms—‘the rumoured death of painting’. But after a certain point, following an inevitable inward turn, the real answer is ‘myself’.

Bear in mind that Tait has extraordinary facility as a draughtsman and as a colourist. He can make lyrical dreamlike things replete with gorgeous curving lines; if he's refusing to do so here, going instead for pace and fire and gristle, that's as true to his volatile artistic personality as his more recent rococo compositions were an evolving reaction to his earlier enigmatic single-figure paintings, and as has been his decision, when including three-dimensional works in his exhibitions, to put them there as literal stumbling blocks, things to get in his audience's way. The issue at hand is how one keeps a practice alive—and, by extension, how combined efforts in that direction keep painting vitalised. Acrylic is a resistance or constraint, just as is trying to put a genuine heartbeat into timeworn modernist imagery; or—as Tait sometimes likes to do—making work with a geographical location in mind; or, more largely, resisting the desire to make slicker variations on what has gone before.

In Letts' documentary, the musician Chrissie Hynde notes that it was inevitable that punk's roaring naiveté would be short-lived, musically, as extended time with your instruments inevitably makes you a better musician. The smartest of those musicians didn't discard their own increasing facility so much as find other ways to combat creeping conservatism. In Tait's art, relatedly, some kind of body as it comes into coherence is *a/ways* being flayed, a la *Marsyas*, or origami'd, or dismembered in more or less genteel fashion. If the roots of this unravelling lie in modernism, it's arguable that the body represents something larger: a holistic, even monolithic thing to be broken down. The body, in this sense, might be representative of any fixed and reifying form that Tait's painting risks assuming; and, as such, it'll be undone eventually, subject to turnaround. And, present evidence suggests, when one comes to expect even a consistency of disordering bodies one might resultantly receive no bodies at all, but rather abstraction—percolating arrays of circllets and rods, crackling like electrons in a Leyden jar. The weight of expectation is at once a weight and a galvanising reorienting force, these paintings suggest. Fuck the room, they say, repeatedly; fuck the room.

Martin Herbert 2012