
Conor McFeely

Orchard Gallery, Derry

A teacher in Dublin asks her class, 'Can anyone tell me what volume is?' 'Dunno Miss, but me ma takes two in the mornings.'

The Orchard Gallery has a feeling of seditious seclusion – burrowing underneath the entertainment hall above, it is just a streetwidth away from one of Ireland's newest town-centre malls. Conor McFeely deftly utilised the charge of such a space to aid the reception of his works: an installation of dispersed stuff, lumpen masses hovering in a deliberate twilight like that of a cave dwelling. This was not just your run-of-the-mill, imaginary cave, lit by the first fires and the dawning of human intelligence, but a cave carved in and by the 20th century – the era that dispensed with darkness.

On grey Dexion shelf stacks, a small variety of objects sat in anticipation. The most numerous were the round-ended bomb shapes of oversized prescription drug capsules – invariably an upper, a downer and a Prozac: digestible vestibules to interiority. The mate-

rials utilised were crucial – the surfaces of each group of objects were covered in their own type of insulation, usually industrial, and coloured in the yellow-to-brown range of oleic products. The capsules were cast in halves in the type of solid resin that telephone companies use for preserving connections in underground wiring. In some cases they rested on sections of hard, rubber, eggbox-style mats, normally used to soften the ground for children falling from swings and roundabouts. Three pods or

pill-scoops cut from boiler insulation foam threw out a harshly-lit scatter of small, bullety capsules. Bottles of resin hardener were arranged in proximity. Large 'paintings' based directly on Johns, Stella and Newman pulled the walls in closer. The striations, familiar from these earlier paintings, were achieved not with pigment but with another form of insulation: a sticky, undrying monster of a tape. In a side room, trying to wake up from this brown study, was a fully lit grid of blanket material, stiff-

ened into cylinders by resin, and facing a phalanx of baseball bats on the wall. These were also wrapped in swaddling; a mockery of the insulation provided by blankets and more indicative of attempts to disguise punishment schedules.

McFeely's all-over method of display was deliberately attuned to resemble hard-boiled, art world classics from the last 40 years, recalling Beuys and Arte Povera, Minimal gridding and even the commodity apotheosis of 80s New York. Initially indicating a formal



link between the insularity of the medicated brain and Modernism's interiority (self-supporting insufficiently doubting), the works still kept their distance from too learned a ding-dong with appropriation. Suggesting totally withdrawn interiors, this installation was blocked solid, without drainage – a knockalong visual bassline, a minor-keyed instrumental; all around, but never near.

The sensorium cannot be put on a pedestal or simply signified, and McFeely, no doctor of 'problematic' social situations, didn't try to make his objects a repository for consensual platitudes. Well aware that Derry's most famous explanation for troublesome activity is the word 'just' (as in 'just cuz...'), the show's title, 'Disclaimer', was a deliberate diversion of the onus to be universally communicative, or directly responsible for a cut-and-dried answer to addictive abuse. (As if art would redeem itself in the public eye by becoming only social comment – trading in its own disrepute for expectation-fulfilment.) McFeely reveals that making art as still too dubious a habit, too fraught and self-involved to be able to Betty Ford that easily. Conversely, neither was he interested in documenting the allures of a cool, sirenic, Factoryesque, dooper culture.

'Disclaimer' was akin to the live, late-night TV screenings of *Hotel Babylon* that used a visual syncopation to produce an effect at once very noticeable and almost impossible to describe – like being outside your normal perceptual time scale. It was perceptual distortion employed as a design strategy to approximate the effect on the sensorium of recreational tablets. 'Disclaimer' was ultimately akin to that: the displays were generically so familiar as to be rigidly overqualified and unremarkable, but at the same time, insulated so many times that they gained a repossessed autonomy, to be perceived as disturbingly affecting, with a visual drag difficult to give language to.

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