

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

“‘July’, The approach, London. 12/7 – 10/8/14”, *The Page*, August 1, 2014

July at The approach, London, explores the painterly predilections of eleven topically diverse artists.

Last seen (2014), a large oil painting on linen by Alison Katz emerges from a background of sketchy, densely overlaid life-drawings. There is no sense of presence or engagement with the model in the depictions; rather the brush drawings feel purposefully quotidian and formulaic, drawn from a manual on how to draw, with the model laboring through her repertoire of poses. The foreground to this dormant posturing is composed of two elements – an exotic looking monkey sits in the lower half of the painting beneath a depiction of the page from which it has been cut out, the monkey's cavernous outline echoing its form below. There's an element of wry humour in the monkey's pose, with its hand resting on its chin in Rodinesque contemplation. As the hollow created by the monkey's absence frames the life drawings behind it, there is a sense of *context as a restraint*.

At its most salient, *Last seen* could be seen to comment on depictions of women in art - specifically in their role as life-models – as being comparable to performing or captive monkeys. However the image is by no means overbearingly didactic or opaque enough to tie up this or any other conjectures. The leniency and space around the motifs are extended by the shifts in the yellow tonality, as if bands of sunlight are arbitrarily warming the canvas. Quoting primates in contemporary art is often a byword for the evolution of ideas rather than form, and Katz's monkey could equally be a critique of the art historically loyal viewer stagnating in outmoded interpretations.

Phillip Allen continues to add new layers of interest to abstraction in *Tonic for choice (International Version)*(2014). You can feel the presence of Jasper Johns in his churned up agitated surfaces, but where Johns draws on a lexicon of literacy and numeracy in his painterly simulacrum of letters and numbers, *Tonic* appears to be inscribed with the more breathy, guttural forms of *punctuation*. This seems to be a central theme in contemporary abstraction – a phrasing of the utterances beyond typography, an antidote if one is needed to the evident or overtly informative. Allen's heavy, hungrily substantial maze of scratched, clawing aggravation gives you a reason to keep looking, to invest in the image. These things, whatever they are, can't be easily summarized. The more you look the more the painting gives, the more immersive its vocabulary. If you're content to skim-read the dust jacket *Tonic* isn't for you.

Caragh Thuring's *August 1776* (2011) has you browsing Google to find out what happened on that apparently fateful day. Expectations of a famous volcanic eruption are confused by the entries on The Battle of Long Island. Fought on August 27th 1776, this was the first major battle between the British and George Washington's continental army after the United States had declared independence. Whilst it might be tempting to try and project symbolism into Thuring's motifs and build bridges with this possible reference point, or even speculate on her personal plans to recapture Manhattan for British art, this overt intent doesn't seem suited to her approach.

Space feels an important element in Thuring's paintings – flat, sparse backgrounds bring the tension of an empty page, with its heightened expectancy and awareness of the arrival of each mark. There is a relative levity, a lightness of touch in *August 1776*. Her works never feel labored, and this formal

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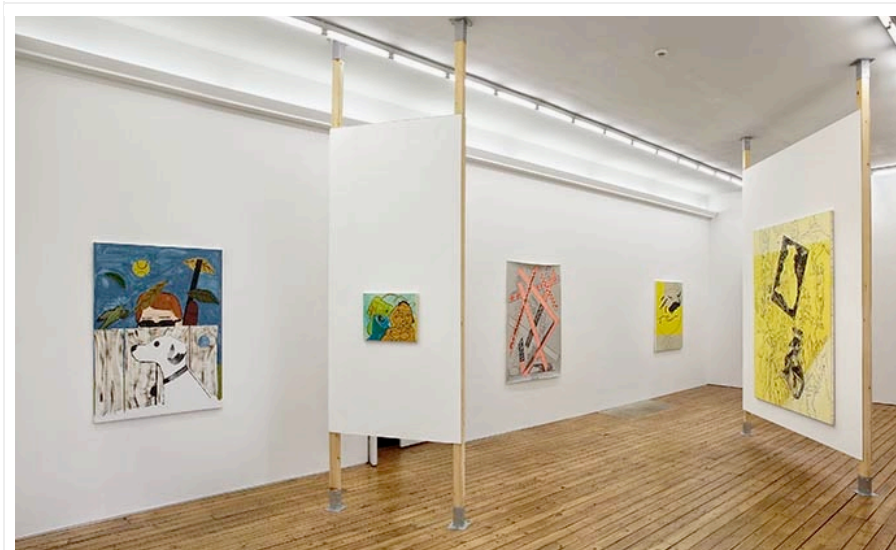
spontaneity seems to drive her subject matter. These relaxed, drawing-based inscriptions have the quality of a sketchbook about them, not driven by intent but formally absorbed; reactionary and responsive to the immediacy of the image of her subjects. Contemporary painting can often feel born of convoluted tactical awareness, which is then dressed with the theatrical robes of reaction and responsiveness. Thuring's animated conjuring seems to be happily headed in the other direction.



Caragh Thuring, August 1776, 2011

August 1776 builds its drama between the voluminous, phenomenological gasp of the volcano and the wall of bricks, a vainglorious attempt to contain the seismic energy beyond. Like Katz's work there is a subtle, dry humour at play, as it comments on both the charm and difficulty of art's efforts to frame the vast, intangible or elemental.

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July, Installation view at The Approach, London, 2014

The press release for *'July'* relates the paintings to *'a fundamentally primitive and humanistic desire to create marks, symbols and images'*. This feels misleading – most of these painters feel thoroughly immersed in, or occasionally in debt to sophisticated, complex historical layers of meaning and interpretation, rather than offering some kind of primordial intuitive bypass. Too many contemporary artists confuse a Wittgensteinian exploration of the limitations of language with going on holiday, and there are moments when *'July's'* array of signifiers and motifs feel a little sun-wilted, happy to jam in the no man's land of painterly libations, or keeping old ghosts alive to furnish a painting's *Raison d'être*. Where *'July'* is most affective the artists give you a richly absorbing sense of the dense tapestry of maps gone by, as they move with the shifting sand dunes of human experience. *'July'* continues until August.

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