

Art Review:

Jason Brooks: Ultraflesh

Marlborough Contemporary, London, 13 Feb-16 Mar 2013

By JJ Charlesworth



Sweet Alice, 2013, by Jason Brooks, Courtesy of Marlborough Contemporary

Jason Brooks is most well known for his giant photorealist, monochrome portraits of friends, artworld people and other glamorous types, rendered on paper in virtuoso airbrush. Perhaps he's too well known for them, especially given their exposure in shows such as Saatchi's 1998 post-young British artist misfire *New Neurotic Realism*. And the fact that they look great in reproduction paradoxically does them a disservice: Brooks's images became quickly associated with the upbeat, Sunday-supplement chic of late-90s British art, but there was always something more to his pictures than collector-friendly portraits of cool looking people.

This is Brooks's first solo show in the UK in five years. Gone are the portraits, replaced by eye-poppingly detailed airbrushed-and-painted images of blown-up photographic details of brushstrokes, along with super-detailed reproductions of charity shop-bought amateur paintings and two finely-crafted bronze sculptures that look like ceramics. Brooks has, in other words, gone all self-reflexive, highlighting what was too easily missed with his earlier portraits – the conflict between photographic surface and materially fashioned image, and what this might say about the status of the hand-made in a culture where the digital photographic proliferates.

Painting images of brushstrokes is an old post-modernist pose, of course, from Gerhard Richter to Glenn Brown, laden with irony and the rhetorics of 'painting is over'. But Brooks's interpretation seems to rebel against this. His paintings of enlarged details of thick impasto brushstrokes buzz and vibrate with an intensity of detail which

exceeds that of the photographs they supposedly re-present. These photographs of paint have become hyper-painting, painting as a challenge to photography, not painting deferring to it.

This manoeuvre doubles back on painting too, though. Brooks's exceptional manipulation of airbrush technique means that his surfaces are in danger of losing their identity as paint, an effect which he avoids only by adding just enough brush-painted detail to cause ripples of subtle modulation across the surface of the paintings. Brooks's vaporous, ultra-modern technique is therefore just as much a conversation with old, heavy, modernist painterliness as it is with the photography that was supposed to make it redundant.

Brooks's art is a sort of tightrope act, then, between the independence of painterly practice and the ever-present claim to supremacy of the virtualised digital image. And this just might lead us to grander theoretical questions about the nature of representation in a world of matter. His sculptures try this out in their own way, too, though maybe they labour the point: one is of a standing naked woman (super-detailed and naturalistic, like nineteenth-century porcelain kitsch), embraced by a male figure that appears to be composed of materialised brushstroke shapes, like petals or flakes. In another, a similarly smoothly-rendered monk-hooded man in trainers (apparently Brooks himself) sits ridiculously the wrong way round on the back of a ram, also made up of these odd petal-like flakes.

There's an air of glum frustration to Brooks's man on a ram, stuck going the wrong way, in contrast to the sense of self-intoxication of the woman entwined with her 'flakey' lover. Just as there's an odd whiff of guilt to the investment-without-return represented by the charity shop paintings which Brooks transforms into ultra-desirable, high-end, contemporary painting. Brooks seems to be attempting to redeem these, even as they are obliterated by their absorption into his work: one little still life he has entirely overpainted with its own reproduction; another small landscape Brooks has had cast in aluminium, producing a metallic surface covered in the ghostly detail of the original brushwork, but with none of the colour. These cycles of disappearance, representation and re-making have a peculiar relationship to newness and seduction, in which Brooks seesaws between revealing the effect and drawing you in to greater levels of mystery. It may be a double bind; Brooks's solution is to never choose between the two.