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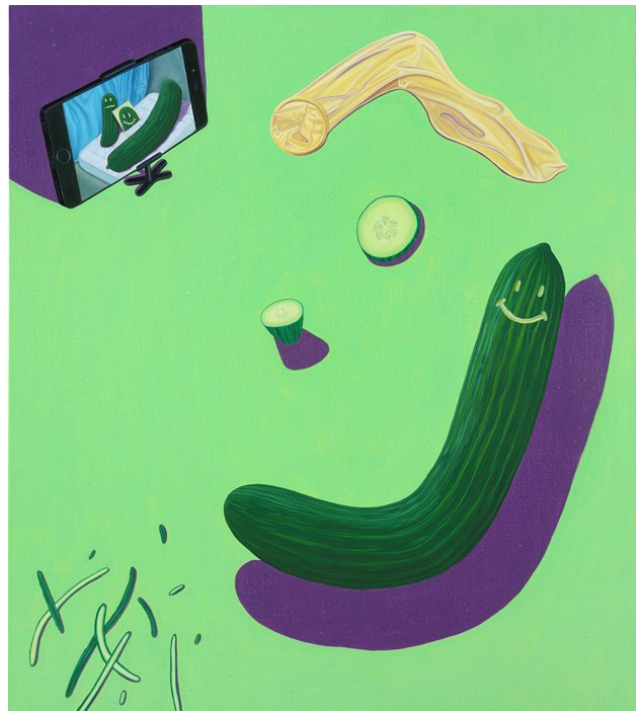
Tristan Pigott paints our self-inflicted anxieties

With a thread of recognisable motifs weaved throughout his paintings, the artist playfully suggests that the anxieties that penetrate our lives are our own fault

Arts+Culture Feature

A month ago Text **Antonia Marsh**

Suspended from sugary-hued walls, Tristan Pigott's new paintings infiltrate the gallery space not unlike the pervasion of screens into our everyday lives. Over-saturating the viewer with loaded colours and visual symbolism, the only thing separating us from feeling we've been immersed into the painted alternative of a digital experience could be the prolonged interaction the complexity of these works begs from us. Reflecting ourselves back at ourselves – the artist back at himself, and us back to the artist – Pigott conceptualises a system of projection and mirroring that enables him to deftly isolate and examine our contemporary obsession with ourselves and our own self-image. Weaving worryingly recognisable motifs throughout the exhibition, Pigott playfully posits that the anxieties that penetrate our lives are self-inflicted. Meeting at a quintessentially British apex of charged cynicism and altruistic humour, Juicy Bits describes a particular mood, one unforgivingly intensified by the looming proceedings of today's election.



"SMS Me"
Artwork by Tristan Pigott

To what extent has the subject of your paintings shifted since your last show?

Tristan Pigott: How we view identity will always be a foundation for my work. Juicy Bits focuses on the internet's impact on creativity and personality growth: what impact a globalised digital world has on our influences and how we explore and view our sexuality.

What was the impetus behind this body of work – what idea did you begin with, and how did this develop?

Tristan Pigott: The show contains new ways of working for me, such as installation, and 3D Printing, and for me these both allowed me to explore how we view art. For example, a 3D –

printed cucumber-coloured healing crystal acts as a case for a USB stick, which contains the CAD files to create the healing crystal case, which can only be accessed by destroying the crystal. This questions which piece holds the value, the object or the files needed to create the object.

You often bring a system of recognisable motifs into your work, that reappear continuously from painting to painting. What specific motifs manifest in Juicy Bits and what role do they play in the exhibition thesis more generally?



“Miracle Grow”
Artwork by Tristan Pigott

Tristan Pigott: Cucumbers appear a lot, that’s because I wanted a playful motif to connect the show, that wouldn’t take itself too seriously. The cucumber has phallic and sexual symbolism, as well as appealing to fashionably-inclined members of the middle-class in its use in water or make-up products. Lard figure-like lumps also make an appearance in a few works. They came about from wanting to make the antithesis of the ideal modern man, an animalistic lump of fat. Their mental state is a lot more ambiguous, such as in “Artist as Medium”, where the lump of lard attempts to get into the centre of the painting, without fear of dripping on its replica Clark Sickle-Leaf carpet (the original sold for over \$40 million). The painting questions the value we place on objects, including paintings, with some becoming highly sought-after commodities. This lump of lard is more interested in displaying the objects that bring him joy in life: crisps and beer.

Some of the people in the paintings might be, or at least seem, recognisable to your audience. Is this deliberate, how important do you feel it is for a contemporary viewer to relate to the subjects of your work?

Tristan Pigott: You want people to relate even, if the sitters might not be recognisable, just through common human psychology. For this exhibition, I have installed a living room in the gallery space, one you might find in a typical 20-something-year-old, young-aspirational-professional, on-a-budget’s flat, something I would expect a lot of people attending the exhibition might be familiar with. For the opening, actors will mirror what the viewer would typically do in the same situation. Hopefully these actors and their activities will be so familiar that the audience might feel uncertain as to whether they’ve interrupted someone literally chilling in their front room, or whether they are themselves invited to relax on the sofa in the gallery.

Perhaps unnerved or uncomfortable, in seeing themselves in the paintings or the living room installation, your audience might reassess their own concerns and ambitions. How do you hope the viewer will feel when they realise that their own aspirations are being called into question, or are you unconcerned with eliciting any particular response?

Tristan Pigott: It’s always great if someone is able to connect with the work. What I always find really interesting is just hearing people’s interpretations, it can be very revealing of their personality.

The ideas behind some of the paintings explore what individualism is today and how we view and believe in our own uniqueness despite countless common traits and generally all adhering to the same rules of society. Fake Plastic Flowers is an example exploring these ideas, depicting a girl in a familiar, somewhat typical pose, but if you look up close you realise she's nervously picking her teeth, contemplating whether or not she should take the easy road and purchase the mass-produced plastic flowers online, as opposed to committing her time and energy to finding the real thing.

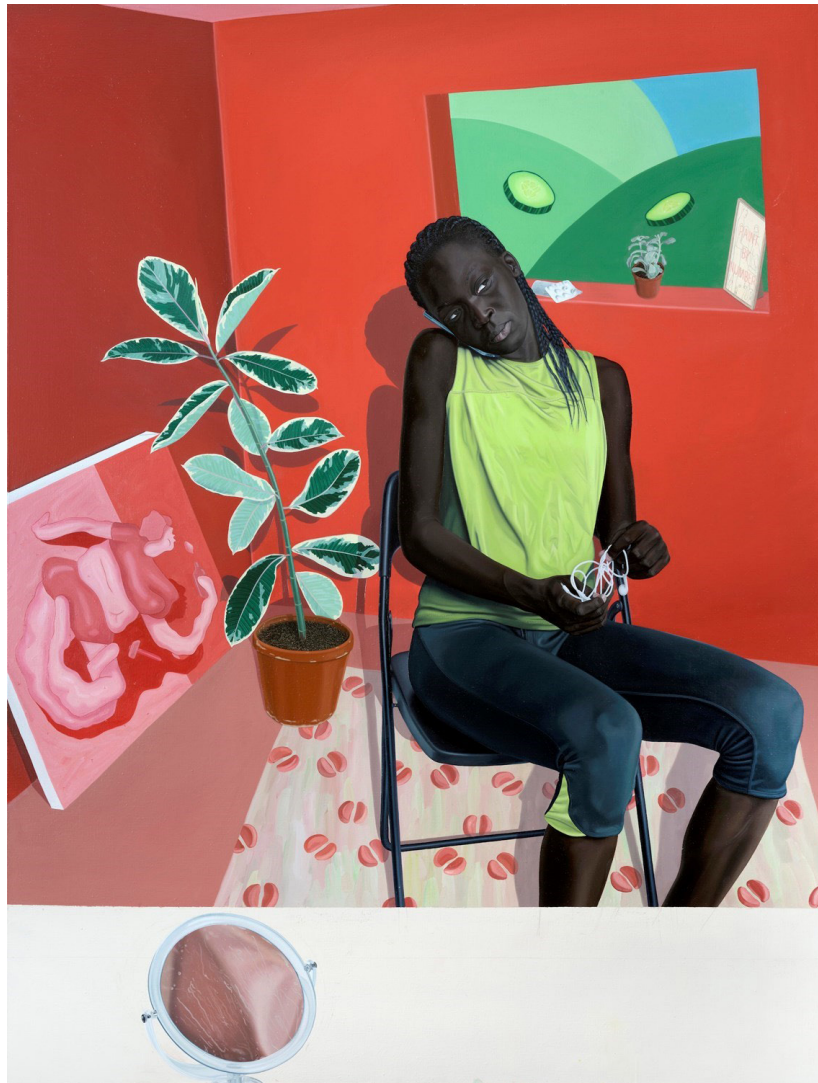
The anxieties that your paintings engage with, feel at odds with the optimistic colour palette and cheery gestures of many of your subjects. This tongue-in-cheek approach to cultural critique feels inherently British. Would you agree that this method of evaluation leaves the argument behind your work more approachable?

Tristan Pigott: I love playing with colour. In the paintings, every object purports its own symbolism, as does each colour, so I guess you could say that colour is the Trojan horse containing a sometimes subversive narrative. For example, in "SMS Me", there's a smiling cucumber watching an iPhone that plays a recreation of Velazquez' "Rokeby Venus" but instead featuring cucumbers on a dirty mattress. There are peelings and pieces of cucumber dotted about along with a condom, hinting to a sexual mutilation by the grinning cucumber. The two cucumber slices and smiley cucumber create an emoji-esque smiley face between them, giving a narrative of middle class anxiety towards sex and the changes in approach to it as a result of apps and our developing habits of sexting.

There's a palpable tension in the contrast between your interest in the millennial's obsession with instant gratification and the temporal associations of oil painting. This would have given you a lot of time to consider a culture so consumed with the fleeting. Taking this into consideration, do you believe that art represents one instance that can still hold a prolonged interaction with a contemporary audience?

Tristan Pigott: One benefit of social media is that everyone is seeing a lot more art than ever before. Of course this depends on each individual, but there are definitely still people out there who are hungry for prolonged experiences with art. One of the reasons painting is seemingly resurgent is due to its ability to hold multiple experiences in one image, unlike many other mediums or objects, which plays right into our consumer culture. **You have committed to paint one work a day throughout the duration of the exhibition. By transforming the gallery into the studio, you reopen the gallery into a space of productivity and as a result, you reveal the creative process behind your work. Is the intention here to satirise the esteemed view society has of the artist as creator, debunking the mystery of the studio and the presence behind the brush?**

Tristan Pigott: There are two aspects to working in the space, one being very practical – you don't have to travel with wet paintings – the other playing with the roles of artist and gallery. My paintings can often take a couple of months to finish, so forcing myself to work in a completely different environment and timeframe is a risk aimed to confront the understood gallery/artist push-pull relationship. The initial aim was to do a contemporary interpretation of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel Heart of A Dog (1925) by playing on his narrative of humanity's desire to play God. I was thinking about this god complex in connection to the rise of artificial intelligence and what consequence this would have for future jobs – including creative ones.



“Hold The Line”
Artwork by Tristan Pigott

Your exhibition opening falls the night before the general election. As an artist, what responsibility do you feel to engage with this? How does the current political climate permeate the work or the exhibition, if at all?

Tristan Pigott: There are certainly pieces that have subtle political implications, such as “Middle Class Still-Life on Antidepressants”, which is about the lack of awareness and acknowledgment surrounding mental health issues. In terms of this election specifically, I wouldn’t say I felt any responsibility to engage with it, as there are many artists far better equipped at commenting on the political than myself. I do think it would feel weird not to pick up on it, so there will be a few subtle reminders dotted around to go out and vote!

Juicy Bits will be on view at Cob Gallery in London until 1st July 2017