

Dani Marti: Fool's Paradise Dominik Mersch Gallery August 2016

You took me up to heaven
When you took me in your arms
I was dazzled by your kisses
Blinded by your charms
I was lost, in a Fool's Paradise
Good and lost, in a Fool's Paradise

...and so goes the lyrics sung by Buddy Holly in 1958.¹ The illusory charms of a fool's paradise promises a state of happiness that is bedded in the pure folly of false hope. The phrase first appeared in 1462 in a collection of English letters by William Paston — *I wold not be in a folis paradyce* — then used by William Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* in 1592 when Juliet's nurse contemplates the young lovers' doomed romance.² By the time George Bernard Shaw used the phrase in *Misalliance* in 1910 it had become a cliché.³

Dani Marti's new series *Fool's Paradise* takes this mysterious concept as the foundation for his illusory paintings made from reflectors in varying arrangements with titles as if from an ancient poem or song. Compositions and arrangements of moon yellow and dawn, coastal blue and honey sizzles, hospital green and golden peach, endless green and morning wisps sit alongside others of night-tide forest and sizzling thirst, deep victory and howls in blue and yellow; lastly slippery silvery stones and fading histories. Each arrangement weaves words, colours and emotions into a seamless, floating poem that draws the beholder into its mysteries and tales composed from reflectors that twist and writhe across the surface.

These paintings of folly and illusory promises are an alchemist's dream of a fool's paradise that seems just out of reach much like Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1597–99) who stares into the water forever fixated by his own reflection. As myth has it, Narcissus neither recognised himself nor realised that the mirror was a boundary between reality and fiction, an illusory trope that led to his demise.⁴ This almost melancholic desire of Narcissus for an unreciprocated love that was in fact only an image is played out in Marti's sculptural paintings in the tension between touch and vision. The seductive surfaces of colourful reflectors, which are used in daily life for safety and protection, are presented here to be consumed and to be experienced as a mirage or a portal of endless screens much like the reflection of Narcissus. The series plays with the history of painting, such as colour, painterly surface, perspective and the ways in which light defines the surface of a thing. Painting, as Pliny the Elder knew only too well is illusion itself, as he witnessed Zeuxis's painting of a bunch of grapes that appeared so real that bird's flew down to peck them.

¹ Written by Norman Petty, Horace Linsley, and Sonny LeGlaire.

² Alison Westwood, *The Little Book of Clichés: From Everyday Idioms to Shakespearian Sayings* (Canary Press eBooks, 2011).

³ Christine Ammer, *The Dictionary of Clichés: A Word Lover's Guide to 4,000 Overused Phrases* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011).

⁴ Miele Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 237.

Instead of paint, Marti uses everyday materials, favouring process over image making and follows in a long line of artists challenging what painting is and what it does. Barnett Newman's evocative black painting *Abraham* from 1949, whilst minimally painted, is indeed a portrait of his father. As he wrote in 1948 "We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings."⁵ Marti also uses the genre of portraiture to deconstruct painting, rejecting paint and brush but embracing the structure of painting to represent pleasure, desire and his own mother.

In the two series, *The Pleasure Chest* and *Mother* Marti weaves together vintage necklaces collected from charity shops for over two years. The weaving and tying of the individual necklaces reflect notions of time and labour, processes related to work and making. As a form of collective portraiture, the *Mother* series in compositions of gold, white and black, weave together necklaces made from beads, fake pearls, silver and gold, all of which are typical of costume jewellery discarded over a lifetime. They are the bits and bobs left at the bottom of a jewellery case perhaps worn lovingly, purchased on a whim, or precious gifts forgotten on the passing of the wearer. The baroque minimalist pieces evoke layers of histories and emotions of the former wearers with their stories woven together to form a sea of lost narratives. *The Pleasure Chest* series similarly suggests the secret lives of the former wearers, jewels received from partners, lovers or children with the title referencing a chest of treasures or the chest of the wearer on which the necklaces rest with their caressing touch.

As in many of Marti's works the layers of arcane meanings and narratives simultaneously intertwine and counter each other. *The Pleasure Chest*, whilst denoting sensuality and desire in its reductive minimalist surfaces, also brings to mind a queer dress-up box or sex shops where fantasies can be bought in the form of sex-toys and bondage wear. The paintings evoke a Freudian fetishist assemblage of sexuality, repression, motherhood, ecstasy and desire, themes that Marti has explored in earlier works. As if in a dream the works function through an irrational signifying chain of associations and an incongruous condensation of objects much like Max Ernst's strange meeting of objects in the sewing machine and dissecting table, drawing on Freud's notion of the Oedipal complex and unconscious desire.

In addition to the lusciousness of the paintings are two video works that continue the visceral experience from touch to sound and moving image. Continuing the themes of Narcissus and a fool's paradise, *Fallen Screens*, comprising of 4 plasma screens in their fallen state, display glitter shimmering on a red carpet, writhing and pulsing as the light bounces off their glorious surfaces. The final work, *Ice Blue* is a video about Mark, a former antique dealer who lives in a small flat in New York City. Mark's story unfolds over a sequence of vignettes, a succession of broken spectres of his former life that are caressed by the camera much like that of lover's intimate touch. As our eyes wander over the enigmatic surfaces of antique possessions that fill the space, sounds of the city and a dripping tap emanate through the layers of colour and tone. An

⁵ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Tiger's Eye* 1.6 (December 1948): 51-53 quoted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (MA: Blackwell, 2002), 581-82.

unspoken narrative of loss and failure evolves and scatters throughout the video reflecting his physical decline and addiction to the destructive forces of the drug known as Ice. Mark, or *Iceblue* as he is known on a gay hook-up website, appears here as a baroque sculptural figure, still and contemplative as if already frozen in time much like his discarded and lost past.

Donna West Brett, August 2016.