

Filip Berendt

every single crash

David Crowley

Working in Taiwan a few years ago, Filip Berendt was struck by the profusion and variety of ordinary materials on sale there. Taipei's shops offer paper, metal foil, plastics and other everyday materials in dizzying, even excessive, variety. He was also drawn to black, perse and green jellies made from lychees and different grasses in Taiwan. In their diversity and unfamiliar textures and finishes, these cheap but often lustrous substances struck Berendt, an artist from Poland, as strangely vital, even 'creepy'. He started using them in photographic experiments with colour and light that eventually developed into artworks which form three series sharing a common title, 'Every Single Crash' (2011-13). Combining photographs of shimmering light patterns reflecting off the surfaces of some unknown order of objects and intense monochromatic planes, the 'Every Single Crash' images seem to offer an invitation to a rich world of sensation. Perhaps one might sense hints of the brash artificial light and colourful signs of the streets of Taipei and the lush nature of the East Asian island in the first and second series, as well as the cooler, subfusc notes of Poland where Berendt made the third set in 2013 using different resources including animal bones and aluminium. But these images eschew photography's promise to explain the world to the viewer: instead, they present matter which refuses to stabilise into fixed forms or coherent objects.

In fact, the 'Every Single Crash' works present the viewer with uncertain surfaces, scales and effects. What has been recorded? How small or large are these assemblages of things? Are they things? If so, where are they? Berendt uses instant film, a once-popular format (then known by the generic trademark, Polaroid) that is still employed by studio photographers for test shots today. Instant film accentuates the colour and the contrast of the subject but lacks the overpowering detail of much digital photography. In fact, in his third series the images look particularly lossy, as if some information has been discarded in the process of making them, or, like the electron microscope images of the ultrastructures of cells and crystals; matter beyond human perception. But these are not digital images. A product of analogue techniques, they result from a resolutely manual process. Working in the studio, Berendt creates temporary sculptures from ordinary materials, all the

time checking the appearance of his assemblage in the camera. Each sculpture is fashioned for the lens. Preoccupied with managing the effects of light and colour, he searches out light reflections in the arrangement of the form. Light ricochets – or perhaps as the series' title suggests, *crashes* - from one surface to another, or is absorbed in the waxy skin of some unidentified substance. The vivid colours in these photographs are not the inherent properties of materials but are the additive effects of light. Once the photograph is made, Berendt destroys the sculpture. The image is then incorporated into artworks that seem closer to paintings than anything else. The chromatic effects in the studio photographs – already overpowering - are sometimes amplified by being laid over simple geometric compositions and then set into monochromatic frames. In these ways, Berendt's work produces in the attentive viewer the kind of retinal afterimages and auratic effects of colour contrasts which have long preoccupied artists and scientists alike.

In some works in the first 'Every Single Crash' series, the flat colour fields which form backgrounds for the photographs flood over the picture frame. A boundary or limit, the frame usually separates the artwork from the world. It is, according to Louis Marin, one of the 'means by which a representation presents itself representing something'.¹ When Berendt colours his frames in the same vivid hue as the picture plane, he reminds the viewer that the artwork is less a representation than a three-dimensional object. Like the photography of sculptures which have been carefully organised by Berendt to form an angular constellation of planes for the lens, this is another switch of dimensions.

Berendt's engagement with form, light and colour place him outside the dominant currents of Polish art, at least in recent years. Many of the most high-profile artists who have enjoyed critical success have acted as guides to the transformation of the country since 1989, often for international audiences fascinated by the catastrophe and dreamworld of Soviet style socialism. Artists like Monika Sosnowska and Wilhem Sasnal have put a spotlight on blind spots in the historical consciousness and on the rapid transformations and commercialisation of public space. Berendt, however, belongs to a different current in Polish art that has taken a much deeper interest in the formal qualities of art and their effects, not least on the operations of the eye. A line can be traced from the constructivist avant-garde of the 1920s through the experiments in visual perception made by artists like Jan Ziemski and Jerzy Rosołowicz in the 1960s known as 'wizualizm', to the quasi-scientific

¹ Louis Marin, 'The Frame of Representation' in Paul Duro, ed., *The Rhetoric of the Frame. Essays on the Boundary of the Artwork* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 93.

formal experiments of structural film makers associated with the Workshop of Film Form in the 1970s. Berendt's place in this succession is perhaps not surprising: he studied in Łódź, the city that might justifiably claim to be the home of this tradition. In what was once a major centre of industry, modernist painters and constructivist artists created one of Europe's first museums of modern art in 1930. Berendt admits a fascination with the works of one of their number; Henryk Stażewski (1894-1988), the longest lived member of the inter-war avant-garde whose paintings and reliefs rarely departed from the zone of geometric abstraction. In the 1960s Stażewski adopted the square as the basic element in his artworks. By multiplying and subtly colouring this 'component' on monochromatic planes (which, like Berendt, he often extended over the frame), he produced intense colour effects and the illusion of movement.

Viewed in isolation, the three 'Every Single Crash' series seem to have an affinity with Stażewski's investigations into optical effects. But seen in the company of other works made by Berendt over the last decade or so, they signal an interest in something a little darker. Earlier works include 'Pandemic' (2009), a series of photographic studies of mould that look like the last traces of life in a dying world, and 'Badland' (2010-11), a series shot in the studio in which androgynous human beings appear to be as artificial and repulsive as the fetid objects that they try to adapt as tools and clothing. Far less abject than these works, the 'Every Single Crash' series still have the capacity to disturb. This may have to do with the 'creepy' associations of some materials that first drew Berendt into the shops of Taipei, as well as the intense concentration of colour in the works.

We come to images cued to perceive them. Our experiences of colour, movement, sight, sound, smell and touch, form a kind of memory field against which we judge all images but photographs in particular. Held back from complete abstraction, Berendt's images seem to hover on the edge of a distinctly palpable and yet unknowable world. This has much to do with the way they seem to call for and, at the same time, deny touch. We engage with the world responsively, testing our expectations against experience. Hard or dry, soft or wet? We like to touch things for the veracity and certainty that this sense provides. Philosopher Georg Hegel claimed that, of all the senses, only touch can give a *sensation* of spatial depth. 'Initially,' he writes, 'the child only has the sense of light, through which things are made manifest to it. This mere sensation misleads the child into grasping at distant objects as if they were near at hand. However, the child learns about distances through the sense of touch. Thus it acquires a sense of visual proportion and casts which is

external outside itself.² Even when touch is not possible (or, meaningful in an immediate sense, as in the case of almost all photography), we still rely on haptic memory. Occasional notes in Berendt's compositions seem to offer these cues of familiarity – rippling waves of light across a surface suggest cool smoothness or perhaps the grainy texture indicates sawn timber – but for the most part these images seem to confuse our sensory memory. Perhaps this is where their fascination and even their creepiness lies.

Text commissioned on the occasion of the exhibition Filip Berendt: every single crash at l'étrangère, London (8 May – 14 June 2015)

² G. Hegel cited by David Michael Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (University of California Press, 1993) 108.