On Frame and Ground

Joseph Constable

"Aha!" he cried, "you did not expect to see such perfection! You are looking for a picture, and you see a woman before you. There is such depth in that canvas, the atmosphere is so true that you cannot distinguish it from the air that surrounds us. Where is art? Art has vanished, it is invisible! It is the form of a living girl that you see before you. Have I not caught the very hues of life, the spirit of the living line that defines the figure? Is there not the effect produced there like that which all natural objects present in the atmosphere about them, or fishes in the water? Do you see how the figure stands out against the background? Does it not seem to you that you pass your hand along the back? But then for seven years I studied and watched how the daylight blends with the objects on which it falls. And the hair, the light pours over it like a flood, does it not? … Ah! she breathed, I am sure that she breathed! Her breast – ah, see! Who would not fall on his knees before her? Her pulses throb. She will rise to her feet. Wait!"

"Do you see anything?" Poussin asked of Porbus.

"No…do you?"

"I see nothing."

The two painters left the old man to his ecstasy, and tried to ascertain whether the light that fell full upon the canvas had in some way neutralised all the effect for them. They moved to the right and left of the picture; they came in front, bending down and standing upright by turns.

"Yes, yes, it is really canvas," said Frenhofer, who mistook the nature of this minute investigation.

"Look! the canvas is on a stretcher, here is the easel; indeed, here are my colours, my brushes," and he took up a brush and held it out to them, all unsuspicious of their thought.

--- Honoré de Balzac, The Unknown Masterpiece, 1831 [extract]

Balzac's curious short story of the old master Frenhofer, a man driven to madness by his obsession with capturing the true form of the beautiful courtesan, Catherine Lescault, speaks of both creation and destruction in the process of image-making. The reality that Frenhofer sees on his canvas is the result of a relentless tautology of the artist's hand: layers upon layers of form, line, and colour, which in turn render his subject invisible. It is Frenhofer's desire to discard imitation that leaves him with the void; with nothing other than images of his own reality the very notion of the image becomes devoid of all content. All that is left is the frame and ground of his canvas.

The exhibition On frame and ground takes as its starting point Frenhofer's consuming desire to express rather than to copy, in order to consider the work of four artists who treat image-making and destruction as flexible, plastic processes. Whether through copying, repeating, rupturing or destroying completely, the singular, indexical image of art becomes a vulnerable and obsolete item of play within the method of the artist's hand. In its place there is left only a heap of broken images that traverse the boundaries of frame, ground and screen, two and three dimensionality.

The continual, repeated expression of form, line and colour that Balzac depicts in The Unknown Masterpiece is both echoed in and subverted by the similarly laborious method that Jessica Dally employs. In Frame & Ground (2013), she applies layers upon layers of paint on top of one another in order to create a series of white, acrylic skins which are then arranged, pinned up by or wrapped around wood. The paint that usually assumes a two dimensional state when applied to its canvas is rendered as a fragile, three dimensional object which then flops and droops around solid, natural forms, confusing the spot where background and contours meet. The repetitious act that leads to Dally's 'painting' is at once destructive and productive; the layers of white paint do not shroud an existing image (as Frenhofer's supposedly do), but instead she creates a non-image from the outset, already devoid of its subject matter. What is left behind instead is a purely structural object; the rudiments of painting in their most basic form.

In the short film, Today (2012), James Richards enacts the destruction of a different kind of image: the candid, digital picture, or what Hito Steyerl names the 'poor' image: 'the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores'. Filmed on a beach in Yakoshima, an island in southern Japan, the video presents a single frame shot at ground level in which crashing waves appear to speed up and slow down in their movement towards the camera. Where Dally breaks apart the frame of the canvas, the direct continuation that is established between Richards' hand and the camera (a human presence is suggested by the impromptu cough in the middle of the film), leads to the simultaneous rupturing of both image and screen. Yet in spite of the film being ended by the apparent waterlogging of Richards' positioned apparatus, this destruction is belied by the image's containment within the monitor on which it loops in a cyclical rise and fall in and out of a black, empty screen. Through Richards' manipulation of filmic time, what initially appears as a simple documentation of the brief life and death of a single image is in reality a highly constructed artifice.

The monitor's ability to embody and hold Richards' vulnerable image is countered by Marie Jeschke's precarious projection. In UECK II (2014), the silenced image of a 90s German pop singer called Blümchen flickers across a series of torn paper screens that hang from the ceiling. Jeschke's use of stock imagery ripped from YouTube not only highlights the mutability of shared media through its transformation within the gallery, but it also places this now silenced, meaningless image as secondary to the broken screen on which it falls. By physically tearing the paper screens and allowing us to walk through the projected image, Jeschke creates a narratological and perspectival rupture, privileging what Malcolm Le Grice calls 'spectator time'. The independent spectator does not need to follow the plot; instead Jeschke's draws attention the structuring of meaning via their own physical presence within the space of the projection and the temporal encounter of the work: vision and movement as function.

Mutated imagery takes on an alternative form in the work of Mark Corfield-Moore. In the wall piece, Slippage (2013), he adopts the decorative technique of paper marbling in order to create a single image, which is then physically swiped across a digital scanner, following the light beam's horizontal movement. The black and white, pixelated photocopy that he is left with is then manipulated in size and meticulously fashioned onto the wall in an ordered, linear pattern. Embedded within this process is an aesthetic interplay between pattern and randomness, which rather than acting as opposites, are supplements to one another; each helps to define the other in the movement from handmade original to digital reproduction. For Corfield-Moore, the genuine article, or the indexical image is but a starting point in a continuous chain of derivatives that he utilises as tools with which to playfully construct a potentially infinite set of orders and formations.