## The Density of Life



**All Apologies** 

**IN THE WORK OF SAM JACKSON** things aren't what they seem. His paintings may look as if they're portraits; nothing could be further from the truth. They're paintings that invoke portraiture combined with a hint of the readymade. These are paintings that start life as depictions of portraits – or memories of portraits. Rather like the work of Gerhard Richter, in which he (Richter) paints the photograph as an object, rather than what is depicted in the photograph – a form of second order' representation. It's painting which refers us to a condition rather than a subject – a remembrance of paintings past. Painting as discourse.

At the core of these pictures are a set of ciphers or talismans which take the form of predominantly youthful white women who seem to have appeared from either some mediumistic ether, or torn from an ancient copy of Screenplay or perhaps the sleeve of a charity shop LP – the sort that have the legend 'Stereo' emblazoned across one corner.

## "Are you talking to me...?" Travis Bickle

They appear as if they're a roll call of unidentified victims, long-forgotten celebrities or minor starlets – it's never specified. All now dust – celebrity dust. If that is not enough, Sam Jackson's paintings bear scars and scuffs, looking as if they had been mislaid or passed down. This is conferred by their mildly distressed and desiccated surface – images that seem as if they were once lost or abandoned and have recently been rediscovered – paintings in which two or more individuals seem to have had a hand, sometimes years, even generations apart, each unaware of the other's existence, or intentions. Some paint, others pen epigrams and several others half remembered lyrics and fragments of texts.

All of which creates the 'noise' of partial, fleeting and fugitive thoughts – intangible, broken and bruised. It's a cliché to suggest that disassociation and discontinuity are symptomatic of modernity but few painters manage to reflect this more convincingly – or more authentically – an incongruous term, for what is fundamentally a fully synthesised form of appropriationist painting.

Sam Jackson's paintings have the appearance of apparition. They look as if they were portraits of the 'departed' as if summoned by a medium. The theatrical or performative analogy can be extended to a kind of ventriloquy in which the painter voices the cipher or image.

A critical element of Sam Jackson's paintings is the distinction between wakefulness and sleep. Key to these pictures is what Celia Green and Robert Waggoner (amongst others) have termed lucid dreams – a state in which the dreamer is aware that they're dreaming and is able to influence the dream.

The surface of the painting exemplifies this as it's a mix of fleeting thoughts and hypnagogic imagery – the internal chatter and broken ramblings that characterise the drift into sleep. Near waking images of a lost love or some unspecified longing



When Doves Cry

- smeared with unfiltered phrases and irrepressible thoughts. Along with the misremembered lyrics of a song that may or may not have ever existed. Melancholic reflections of false hope and faded celebrity – the ashes of so many aspirations.

## "Today I wrote nothing." Daniil Kharms

The surfaces, as there are two distinct surfaces, are both (in their own terms) utterly coherent. The first are the likenesses that are a consistent appropriation of some rather nostalgic form of portraiture, redolent of upper class Edwardian drawing rooms, which have been wilfully misappropriated in such a manner that makes them seem 'wrong' – but simultaneously fascinating.

There's also a sense of fetish reminiscent of Dogon sculpture of Mali. Dogon sculpture is characterised by gaunt wooden carvings with masses of six-inch nails rammed into the head. Sam Jackson's paintings also reference ritual West African scarification.

Another and more parochial memory that is aroused is the inside back page or cover of a school exercise book which would be embellished with the name of some crush, written and ornamented repeatedly to the point of illegibility. Stylised hearts and flowers drawn as if in a reverie. Even the ground colour of Sam Jackson's paintings evokes those sugar paper greens, blues and browns of exercise books.

There are worried fragments of graffiti swarming over the surface like flies on a piece of week-old meat – or worse – soiled souvenirs that harbour decaying memories. Images distilled from a distant and sometimes indistinct sense of collective memory. There's a lot of talk about memory and the retrieval of memories – it kept Proust busy for almost 20 years.

There's also Simon Schama's excellent Landscape and Memory that addresses this from an historical perspective. Much closer to the paintings of Sam Jackson is the work of the multifarious W. G. (Max) Sebald, who invests his writing with a rich mix of self and otherness, fiction and non-fiction, engendered to some extent, by his use of what appear to be found and out of focus black and white photographs. The boundaries are many and soft.

"Never leave the day room, never leave the day room..." Grandpa Simpson

A sense of decay and subtle decadence permeates the imagery. Stéphane Mallarmé still casts a shadow. The broken texts skip and slide across the surface of the paintings like so many haptic outpourings and random anxieties, that decoded read as: What happens after death? Where's the next meal coming from? Is this it? Why me? What's all this then?

Whenever I reflect on Sam Jackson's work there's something tantalisingly insoluble – strange to say – but I'm never quite sure if I've dreamt them. An infectious form of collective amnesia perhaps?

Ultimately these paintings are lamentations for the passing of youth, the ineluctable passage of time and the attendant weight of that anxiety. A way, perhaps, of assuaging the creeping and unpleasant suspicion that our best years may be behind us? The familiar constantly rendered unfamiliar by the sheer density of life.