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# JEFFREY DENNIS'S PAINTINGS AND PAINTED OBJECTS BY ROBERT MEAD

Ruin and rebirth: Most of us are familiar with the sight of a derelict building, or the rubble of a recently demolished site waiting for the struts of a new structure to emerge along with the scaffolding that will suddenly leap up around it.

This cycle is a continual process, particularly in ex-industrial zones and cities. *Ringbinder* at the NGCA Sunderland – a major solo exhibition of the paintings of Jeffrey Dennis – offers insights into the cyclical nature of our built environment, and into painting's potential as a model for understanding these changes in new ways. Dennis's paintings act as structural forms of 'suspension', and through intense shifts in micro- and macro-focus, they examine how we experience location and aspects of the external and internal. Like the early stages of a new building, they are heavy with material and process, the scaffolding and sinews often exposed. Historically, painting itself seems locked into a similar cycle to that of our cities – a cycle of continual renewal, moving between states of supposed death and resurrection. Sunderland is a city in transition, and *Ringbinder* (both the show and the painting of the same name) presents a framework for that experience of the city. The title painting is the outcome of Dennis's personal research into the area – the city revealed as an example of this cycle of reuse and

regeneration. It includes depictions of redundant docklands, now parcelled up into units producing a random range of goods and services, and of a disused shop, reconfigured as an improvised cultural hub and a base for a local band. Throughout the exhibition, the 'internal' of an artist's painting practice and the 'external' of the city are entwined.

*"Along the Passaic River banks were many minor monuments such as concrete abutments that supported the shoulders of a new highway in the process of being built. River Drive was in part bulldozed and in part intact. It was hard to tell the new highway from the old road; they were both confounded into a unitary chaos".*  
– Robert Smithson

Dennis explored Sunderland by walking, looking, and photographing – a research practice surprisingly aligned with that of Robert Smithson in his exploration of Passaic, New Jersey. Both artists share a habit of zooming in on certain elements and moments, creating idiosyncratic visual archives. Smithson adopted the tight square format of the cheap Instamatic camera. In *Monuments of Passaic*, he writes of *Anti-Ruins*, the dereliction of New Jersey as potential, growing into the new architecture.

The NGCA gallery hosting Dennis's exhibition – itself part of a former department store – features a large window looking out over Sunderland (revealed for Dennis's show after having been boarded up for ten years), offering up the perfect vantage-point from which to view the *tableau vivant* version of his works; counterparts going about their business in the streets below as analogues to the small figures scurrying around in his paintings. The window also frames a collection of the jumbled architecture that Dennis draws attention to: the grand old library; Brutalist shopping arcades; and the distant landscape, all simultaneously in





view. The exposed pipes and beams of the gallery ceiling echo the conduits and tubes within his paintings, which wedge, traverse, and intercept the picture plane.

The material and imagery of Dennis's works are inseparable. Containers and packaging found in the studio are pictured in, or actually become part of his paintings, and a cement-like mix of paint, sawdust, and grit is used to assert a physical presence on the surface of the canvas. Cables and tendons that appear to lash the painted elements together – the depiction of physical bindings – act in accord with the surface accretions and the overall 'bubblescape' structure, to hold all the disparate elements in place.

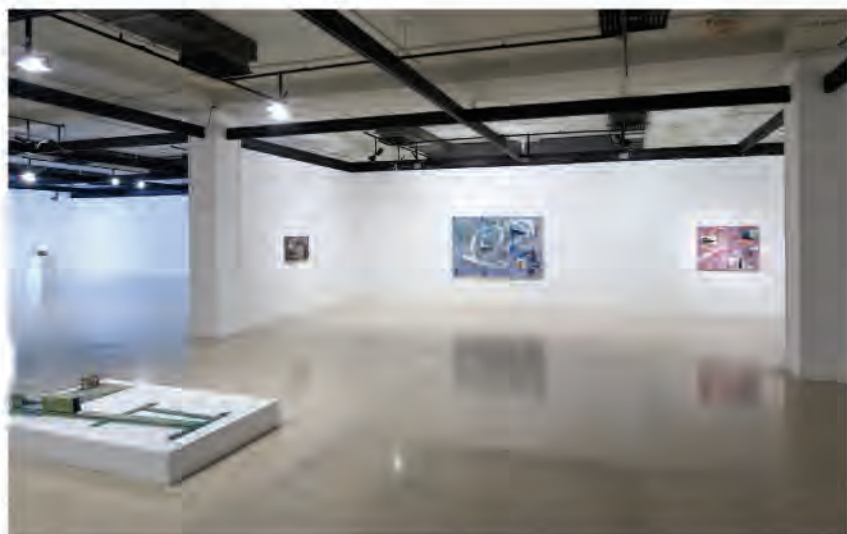
While the gallery window facilitates an actual exchange between

outside and inside, the sculptural pieces in the show create a whole other space within the space, again highlighting the internal and external. These pieces, originally remnants from the studio made alongside the paintings as test constructions, and appearing as images within other paintings, make public what was previously concealed: an internal 'studio' matter. As a working method this brings to mind the painter Nicolas Poussin who created elaborate *maquettes* for his paintings, or the art director for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Hermann Warm, whose painted miniatures helped him to conceive his Expressionist sets. Dennis's sculptural pieces can be read not only as architectural models or stage designs from the studio, but also as yet other examples through which to

**Ringbinder**  
2015  
Oil and charcoal on linen  
127 x 193 cm

*Courtesy of the artist*





Left: 'Ringbinder' show  
Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland  
25 Jul - 17 Oct 2015

Right: The Great Pipes Monument - Robert Smithson  
1967

Courtesy of Collection of the National Museum of Art,  
Architecture and Design, Oslo  
All rights Reserved, Estate of Robert Smithson / Licensed by  
VAGA, New York



understand the dichotomy of internal and external; the personal and the public; small spaces within the larger space of the gallery.

These 'models' imply a filmic influence that runs through all of Dennis's work, most obviously in his use of fragmented sequences of images. He has spoken of being 'envious' of film – that it can contain a time-based narrative. This has led to what he describes as his interest in a 'bleeding' point – the influence of film leaking into painting. Smithson's own practice wandered between sculpture, film, and text. He presented his *Spiral Jetty* in film and text, and, for the majority of us, encountering the iconic earthwork through still photographs or as a story is still the only way we have experienced it. His writing, too, is in a filmic style – referring to photographic qualities to describe how he sees and how he composes his scenes.

Dennis's paintings make use of many filmic tropes and devices (in particular, cropping, zooming, and inset scenes), not dissimilar to Smithson's Instamatic *Passaic* works (fragmented, cropped images). This allows him to create a narrative flow within his paintings. Dennis shows that painting is a

tool with which to find bodily experience in the process of making, but also through the role of depiction, framing, and editing - that painting can be a device for exploring temporality: both the passage and the suspension of time.

The giant broken clock that greets travellers emerging from Sunderland station, and which features prominently within the painting *Ringbinder*, seems like a *memento-mori* for the once 'modern' building on which it is mounted; something held in a state of suspended animation.

With this idea of suspension in mind, we can view *The Artist Successfully Levitating in the Studio* (2011), as a distinct, if playful, statement of this ambition. The painting presents an impossible and affirmative act against the negation of a post-structuralist system, where gravity is non-existent; a rebuttal to Bruce Nauman's documented 1966 performance *Failing to Levitate in the Studio*. This riposte to negative collapse is made possible through a sense of aspiration and rebirth. It is a defiant and humorous assertion that painting might achieve more than may be currently imagined: a return to painting, to image, figure, material, personal history, and memory. There is a feeling that

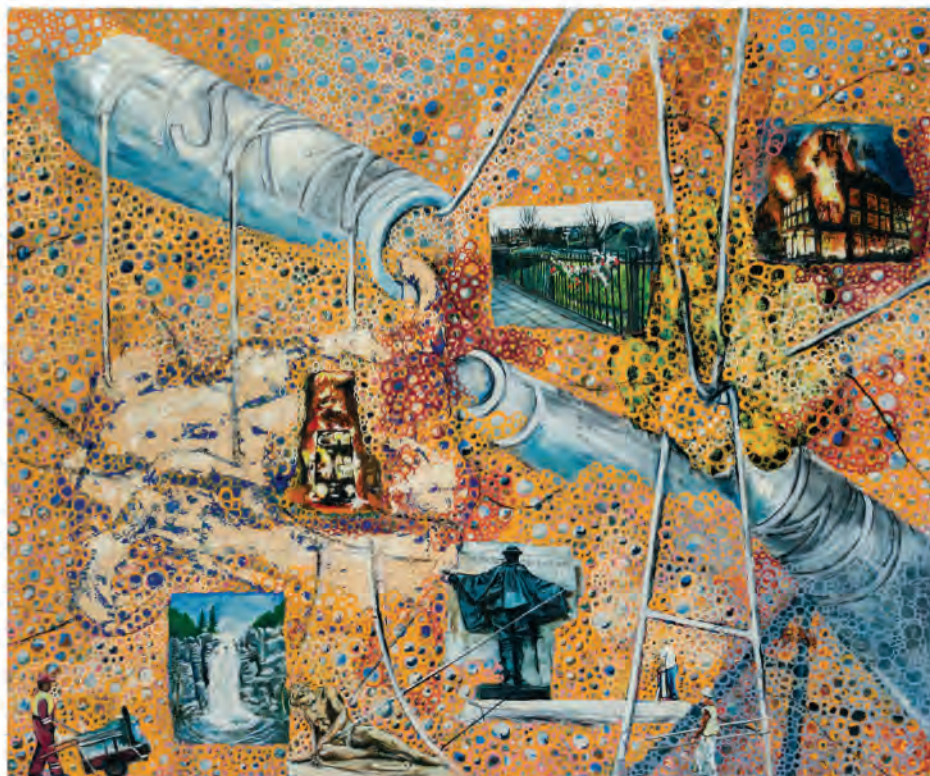


painting will emerge unscathed, like Smithson's *Anti-Ruins*; that every collapse is simultaneously a recovery. While in Dennis's painting, as in Yves Klein's 1960 photograph *Leap into the Void*, there is a man literally caught in mid-air, the images within every Dennis painting have an anthropomorphic aspect: fixed in place in their *bubblescape* universes, they are like humans themselves held in place by atmospheric pressure.

A 'ring-binder' is a device to hold an expandable body of information – a near-obsolete system, superseded by digital technology, not unlike painting itself. However, as an embodiment of the slowing of time, and as a calibration of entropy, *Ringbinder* may have a greater significance as a temporal coil: as a container of time, idea, structure, and form.

J. G. Ballard's short story *The Voices of Time* presents an isolated scientist living in a post-nuclear landscape, attempting to channel the infinite sounds of the universe into his ears. Doing so allows him to hear time slowing down, before an eventual collapse. Dennis's work is attempting to operate on a similar cosmic level. The paintings seem to slow the rhythms of living and our fleeting experiences, pulling them apart to allow us to peer closer, and to witness a suspension of the time flowing around us.

Tacita Dean has written: "*Smithson's jetty spiralled downward in the artist's imagination through layers of sedimentation and prehistory, in ancient repetition of a mythical whirlpool, coiling beneath the surface of the lake to the origins of time in the core of the earth below*". Dean describes the structure that Ballard's scientist inhabits at the end of *The Voices of Time* as a mandala with distinct similarities to *Spiral Jetty*; "*a virtual mirror, a kaleidoscope upwards into cosmic integration and the tail-end of time*". And this is how Dennis's *Ringbinder* – and his work as a whole – functions: as a form of cosmic integration.



*The Flowers that Came Again*  
2012  
Oil and charcoal on linen  
123 x 148 cm

Courtesy of the artist

The artist's experience of Sunderland, linking the circular imagery he found there – as with Smithson's photographic record of Passaic, and Tacita Dean's experience of *Spiral Jetty* – involved looking at the place both from a great distance and in close detail. Dennis shares an aesthetic with Dean who is drawn to technology which is on the edge of oblivion, or to the last manifestations of the dying medium of film itself. This can be seen in her film of the pre-war, giant concrete listening stations in Kent (are they mechanisms to collect 'voices of time'? ). Not only is it possible to walk *Spiral Jetty* on foot (as Dean did), but we can also observe it 'from space', through Google Maps: a striking example of the 'macro-to-micro' journey. In her 2013 film *JG*, which came about as a response to Ballard's challenge to Dean to explain *Spiral Jetty*, she uses 'aperture gate masking', a labour-intensive process of stencilling, which allows her to use





Left: *The Artist Successfully Levitating in the Studio*  
2011  
Oil and charcoal on canvas  
35 x 40 cm

*Courtesy of the artist*

Right: Robert Smithson's 'Spiral Jetty'  
Google Earth



differently-shaped masks to expose and re-expose the negative within a single frame. This process requires running the unexposed film through the camera multiple times, giving each frame the capacity to traverse time and location in ways that parallel the effects of both Ballard's fiction, and of Smithson's *Jetty* and his own films of it. There is a resonance with Dennis's reiteration of circles that make up the *bubblescape* of his paintings – a constant overlaying of paint layers through which images collapse.

Dennis's *bubblescapes* were originally inspired by the foam in a washing-up bowl used for a mundane chore. He transformed this experience into a field for the imagination, and found it again in a scene from Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, in which the camera zooms in on the froth on a cup of coffee dispersing. The *bubblescape* operates not only as a physical system for constructing the painting and fixing elements within

it, but as an expression both of the mind and of a societal system. Circles within circles or spirals, obsessive and repetitive, become a time-keeping device. The broken clock in *Ringbinder* is symbolic, but it is part of a place undergoing renewal and regeneration (here, a reminder that Smithson believed that a 'ruin' is not a fixed state). *Spiral Jetty* goes through a continual transformation, facilitated by the tides and seasons. Nature is not a fixed state. In his documentation and writings on *Passaic*, we see the filmic influence on his photography, so tightly framed in square format. Did Smithson share Dennis's 'jealousy' of film?

By indicating the parallels between Dennis's paintings, Dean's films, Smithson's earthworks, and Ballard's story-telling, we can demonstrate painting's ability to function as a critical intervention capable of embedding complex information, just as capably as these other art forms do. For each of



these individuals, the task is to highlight something otherwise overlooked – a personal excavation. This is the case with Dennis's 2012 painting *The Flowers that Came Again*, which features an inconspicuous piece of fence, linked to depictions of recent tragic events that prised open the fault-lines of a community.

When comparing Smithson's small square Instamatic images to the vastness of his land-artworks, there is clearly an emphatic contrast. *The Barbour Compendium of Building Materials* is a book Dennis found in a skip in the 1970s. Its small square photographs of building components and interior fittings – aspects of the built environment presented in a disconnected and alienated way – distanced him from the images, and introduced a depersonalising mode of representation that allowed focus on the banal, unnoticed, or forgotten, offering a way to reflect on how the 'ordinary' so easily becomes the uncanny.

Dennis speaks of how, as time passed, these images became even more strange and compelling. Eventually he began to take on the role of this book himself, by collecting his own similar photographs – expedient images of forgotten objects around the studio, and of industrial detritus around the city.

Ballard returned continually to the idea of the 'normal' becoming ruptured, or the normal weirdly persisting within a changing environment (the mineralisation of living things in *The Crystal World* is the result of a 'time leak' from an industrial plant). The normal is gradually subverted: people do terrible things, and a necessity for violence overpowers conformity. Smithson, in his photography and writing, cites manifestations of mundane objects and machines as potential carriers of this allegoric transformation.

*"Since it was Saturday, many machines were not working, and this caused them to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud, or better,*

*extinct machines – mechanical monsters stripped of their skin."* The sci-fi vision imagines weird, monstrous life belonging to a time that is neither past nor future.

The advanced visual structure Dennis has developed – demonstrating painting's potency when invested with structural layering and allowing it to 'try on' the attributes of other media such as film, photography, and language – gives him a framework to channel a way of seeing that is humanistic, critical, and engaged. His paintings expose the structural elements of the system being used to allow this manoeuvre. Smithson's 'reverse ruins' are there in Dennis's work, in the collapse and rebuilding of the painting, and the exposure of the joints and supports: sinews of a building's structure, which are also those of our society. But it would be reductive to regard the works simply as allegorical carriers. These elements – the tubes and bubbles – transcend allegory as part of a greater, layered exchange of visual information. They are the suspension (in the chemical sense of particles suspended in a solution) of our actual experience of environment, and of the proximity of other people. Painting can be seen as the generation of a micro-reality: the artist locked away in the studio working with image, material, and memory simultaneously. Dennis's paintings emerge from the material experience of working with paint – the bodily experience – the desire to fix something of reality within the constructs of a visual system; the structures that act as arteries and skeleton emerging from the heaving *bubblescape*. As a result, the intrinsic qualities of what it is to be alive and human are being touched upon.



Juncture - Robert Mead

2016

Oil, charcoal and copper leaf on cotton canvas  
119 x 167 cm

Courtesy of the artist