

## FLOWERS OF INDETERMINACY some thoughts on recent paintings by David Powell

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The exhibition 'It is the month of May... for me' brings together a selection of recent paintings by David Powell, created between 2012 and 2013. My first encounter with these new paintings occurs in the artist's studio, where I am greeted by a large work with the enigmatic title *Then down a little way*, which the artist tells me is derived from a play by Samuel Beckett. Semi-geometric colour fields in cheerful orange are balanced with subtle greys, yellow, ochre and brown. There are two rows of flowers; one arranged along a kind of low partition wall, the other displayed on what looks like a side table. I cannot decide as to the interior or exterior nature of the depicted space, but the strong diagonal lines clearly invite me to enter it and imaginatively enact the movement suggested by the work's title. What will I find at the end of the route that is suggested to me? Or is the scene in front of me the mysterious destination that I am heading for?

David Powell's recent paintings are highly suggestive of events that seem to be situated mostly in the past. There is a strong sense of melancholy or nostalgia; yet the avoidance of a spelled out narrative or unambiguous emotional content safeguards the work against the suspicion of sentimentality. In comparison to Powell's earlier work, a striking difference is the replacement of human figures, who used to function as protagonists in somewhat indeterminate narrative scenes, by flowers. As the artist tells me, some of them are actually covering figures that were painted in earlier stages of the works. Roses, daisies, fuchsias, asters and the like are displayed in sets or rows and supported by rectangular structures that might represent furniture, flower beds, show cases, shop windows or the like. The flowers rarely join into bunches or even pairs but mostly present themselves as singular entities, afflicted with a unique charisma. Some of them confront the viewer with candid naivete or remote boldness. Others shyly turn aside or seem to be absorbed in their own private sphere. Painted in oil with clearly visible brushstrokes, their physicality stands out against the smooth acrylic colour fields that surround them but is usually not corporeal enough for the viewer to visually possess them. The flowers seem to occupy a somewhat uncanny position in-between a decorative object to be aesthetically enjoyed and a subject potentially capable of interlocation. As a viewer I feel clearly addressed by them but at the same time they refuse to reveal to me their secrets. Feeling slightly seduced and rejected at the same time, their speechless address keeps puzzling me.

The secretiveness of the flowers is echoed by the ambiguity of the pictorial space. I cannot be sure whether I am supposed to be looking at a real space, such as a living room or shop window, or at an imaginative site, where memories of past events occur simultaneously with fantasies and desires about what might be. This indeterminacy is amplified by the paintings' lingering in-between various pictorial styles and traditions. Evoking a wide range of associations, the paintings appear to address a variety of conditions and possibilities of pictorial referentiality as such. Piece by piece they make me wonder what a painting might be, how it refers to what it is not and how these two sides of its being can be reconciled in my experience of it. At first glance, the paintings seem to take an unproblematic, aesthetically comfortable position in-between the figurative and the abstract, the narrative and the lyrical. On closer inspection, however, they distinguish themselves by a discrete yet profound intertextuality that poses questions rather than providing solutions. An attentive viewer may discern echoes of a wide range of painterly idioms: Manet's propinquity of the asynchronous, the vivid surfaces of impressionism, the refined elegance of Japanese prints, the multiple perspectives of cubism, the eloquent surfaces of colour field painting, the aloof lyricism of post-painterly abstraction, to name a few. Indeed, a visitor to Powell's studio will find proof of all these inspirational resources in the form of a wide range of exhibition catalogues, art historical books, postcards, photos and the like.

By playfully conjoining and contrasting the heterogeneous modes of reference that are associated with these manifold artistic styles and movements, Powell seems to investigate both contemporary painting's past and its possible futures. His decision not to choose among pre-existent pictorial possibilities but to rather allow for them being muddled-up, induces the opening-up of a heterogeneous space in which unexpected things might happen. This space comes into existence at the overlaps of and in the gaps between different idioms and their defining features. The viewer is invited to act as the painter's accomplice by imaginatively inhabiting that indecisive pictorial space in order to enact its potentiality. In my perception, the flowers with their ambiguous status –in-between subject and object, the natural and the artificial, excessiveness and control– act as my guides who invite me to join in and play this game, the outcome of which is necessarily open.