Louise Forthun

Urbania

Opening Thursday 24 June 6 – 8 pm
Exhibition 24 June – 24 July 2010

Above, Gliding 2010, oil on linen, 50 x 115 cm
Right, Zooming 2010, oil on linen, 75 x 175 cm
Far right, Pulsing 2010, oil on linen, 75 x 175 cm
Cover, Arriving 2010 (detail), oil on linen, 197 x 231 cm

Overleaf left, Watching 2010, oil on linen, 115 x 180 cm
Overleaf middle, Electrifying 2010, oil on linen, 115 x 180 cm
Overleaf right, Arriving 2010, oil on linen, 197 x 231 cm

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Louise Forthun makes the idiom of painting apparent when she takes the processes and appearances of photography into painting while maintaining its 'out-of-place-ness', its lack of fit. This is particularly so in her paintings of cities produced through an unusual combination of stencilling and painting. Since the mid 1980s, Forthun has used this process in addressing the city as subject. It is an effective means for making a bridge between painting and photography and one that opens up a number of complex and productive comparisons across mediums that make these works all the more affecting in their immediacy.

These paintings register the trace–the founding principle of photography. They begin in photographs of great cities or mundane urban life. These images are cut into stencils and then marked out onto a canvas already prepared with paint. This ground of painting is spontaneous, unlike photographs and in stark contrast to the controlled form of the stencil. Yet, while Forthun's painted ground flows freely it is overlaid with signs of the mechanical and technological. Through this process the positive/negative relations inherent to photography as medium are emphasised at the same time that they are translated into painting and overwritten by its weight as substance. The ground takes this photographic double trace of photograph and stencil but as paint applied to canvas, the painting as trace, also asserts itself. Its substance as physical stuff on canvas takes over the image at the same time as maintaining and emphasising the photographic effect.

Forthun extends this cross-mediality still further in her use of the colour, more particularly the colour of photography. This is not however the colour of naturalistic photographic verisimilitude but rather the confronting separated high tones of primary red, yellow, blue–the colours behind the naturalism of photography that we only see in colour matching strips and print separations. We might say that the energy of these paintings as based in colour is borrowed from the technical palette of new media and yet delivered by the older, low-tech medium of painting in an immediacy that is perhaps only found in a substance that suggests the direct gestural expression of the artist.

Our expectations of photography and painting are also inverted when Forthun's paintings slow the time of the photograph–supposedly the instant–through the considerable labour of making the stencil image. Isolating positive and negative she cuts huge sheets by hand over long hours, making them more and more fragile and further away from the robustness and cohesion of seemless photography with each cut. This crafting of the photographic image makes the painting all the more speeded up by comparison. Splashes, rapid brush marks, and haphazard dribbles give form to immediacy and spontaneity. This is painted form as an instant in time, like and unlike the instantaneousness of the photograph.

Even as Forthun insists on real places as her subject, the refusal of these images to coalesce into a single coherent surface or subject opens the space between painting and photography. We know Melbourne or Sydney, Rome and Tokyo quite differently when they are charged by the immediacy of both painting and photography, their drawing together and springing apart.

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