LUKE HARNDEN / *New Work*

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When gazing into a screen, voyeurism and safety go hand in hand. We watch from one side of a veil, shielded in the (ostensible) knowledge of our own invisibility, while our eyes may feast copiously on whatever passes through our feed. Time becomes liquid, slippery — we no longer notice the velocity of its passing; we are content to gaze, sometimes longingly, sometimes vacantly, but always caught up in the illusion that our own images are themselves safe from scrutiny, protected, as it were, by that glossy, digital veneer. But a screen — in both its material and digital forms — is inherently porous. It may filter, but particles inevitably get across from both sides, even if its holes are only as wide as a pixel. In the act of looking, we are simultaneously engaged in a feedback loop: whether it be through the extraction of our data or the voluntary sharing of personal experience, our voyeurism has been exposed — we are, for better or for worse, no longer invisible.

The aesthetic allure of the works on view in New Paintings functions by way of a similar logic, comfortably — if ambivalently — inhabiting the visual lexicon of the screen while calling its fraught status and complicated promises to the surface. The eye rests easily on each of these paintings, which, although inherently static, invoke the illusion of movement — frozen GIFs that hover like afterimages, refusing to settle. Drawing from diverse source imagery embedded in horizontal RGB lines that recall the fuzzy flicker of a CRT television screen, the paintings evoke a tacit awareness of the hypermediation of the self, in which experience is constantly in confusion with its representation through digital images. In an inversion of the atmospheric perspective technique found often in painting, in which the subject of the image comes into focus upon closer observation, the subjects of Harnden’s images, like those of the screen, become clearer only with distance, reduced to a matrix of pixellated dots and lines when seen from up close, yet resolving into a cohesive representational image when perceived from a great enough distance. This optical effect never fails to baffle — a post-modern clin d’oeil to the affect once induced by the majestic mountains and waterfalls of Kant’s sublime.

Moreover, Harnden’s “painting” technique complicates the very notion of a painting, channeling a productive tension between the recognition of the underlying image and its constructed representation. He is punctilious in the positioning of his works as “paintings:” taking cues from Gerhard Richter's vision of painting as a means to photography, Harnden’s works adapt this idea to the information-technology age by positioning painting as a means of accessing screens. Yet the mechanics involved in these paintings’ creation deploy a singular series of complex transformations that disrupt the line between mechanical and physical labor, between the digital and the material — coming together in a bastard marriage between computer software and the tactile act of painting, one in which the artist’s body becomes a stand-in for the printer arm. The discourses of photography and painting become enmeshed in the process, digital photography slowed down a notch by the element of human error that accompanies painting, a slowness that translates into the works themselves, whose subjects resist immediate recognition, demanding a double-take.

While the paintings beckon our gaze with their synesthetic, screen-like auras, they never neglect to call into question this instinctive comfort. Are we being drawn in by the represented subject, or the representation itself? Are we really “safe”? Who is doing the looking? Which side of the image are we on — the viewer’s, or the screen’s? By conflating human and machine perspectives, and asking us to place ourselves in the position of the screen, Harnden makes the world through the looking glass come alive in new and troubling ways, allowing us to read his source images as from a distance, distorted but all the more real. In Library, a library after an earthquake is seen through the textured “skin" of Harnden’s signature painted RGB lines — but here, the slight warping of this enveloping layer, produced through accidents in the printing process, creates a visual effect of bruised flesh in a further conflation of body, screen, and image. Calling to mind Hito Steyerl’s writings on the poor image and Ernst Van Alphen’s theory of the failed image, Harnden’s images do not hesitate to reveal themselves as constructions, distinct from the subjects that they represent, wrapped in the imagined fleshy materiality of the screen.

These subjects, though varied in scope and scale, some microscopic and others telescopic in nature, are linked by the shared precision of their origins. Harnden garners his images, whether found or self-authored, from rich cultural sites and objects — among them the Margot Hunt Bridge in Dallas, a skull with signs of trepanation marks, and a dovecote atop a suburban Southern Californian home — turning his subjects into hyperobjects of sorts, embedded with complex social and historical referential meanings. There is also a fascination with vast structures beyond the reach of individual human comprehension, often accompanied by a confounding of scale: in Constellation, what appear to be twinkling stars are really camera flashes in a crowded stadium. To the artist, the universe, not unlike the rhizomatic networks of the technological surveillance-capitalism that dictates our societies in unseen and exponential ways, “comprises a wilderness beyond an individual’s threshold of observable experience.” It is this wilderness that lies beneath the skin of the screen in the body of work that makes up New Paintings. Here we are, in the gallery — but there is an aching to get inside.