

ArtReview

Robert Davis

Profile of 2015 Future Great artist, selected by Rashid Johnson

By Rashid Johnson. Published in March 2015



The Guru lyric ‘more milk than Louis Pasteur’ appears in the title of one of Robert Davis’s paintings, and to me it’s a great analogue for his particular combination of swagger and sincerity. He’s usurping familiar forms of painting and turning them to new purpose with references and materials that often lie outside the fine arts. Like a lyricist pushing the structure of a traditional rhyme to absurdity, Davis is using stylistic conventions to his own end, disrupting their meanings and giving the

structure itself new urgency.

At the same time his art is also stubborn. It insists on a literal world of ordinary objects and things that are constantly eroding painting’s promises of singularity and transcendence. This obstinate materialism is obvious in his installations, where the paintings are integrated with furniture he himself fabricates. Rather than sculptures refusing their use value, the benches, beds and tables intentionally assert their function while maintaining, in the context of an exhibition, a perverse dysfunction.

A recent body of work, *Compton* (2014), inspired by the LA Raiders Starter jacket, is an example of this commitment to the dense accumulation of conflicting meanings in a physical object. The Raiders jacket (as popularised by NWA) was intensely symbolic and became, in the visual culture of 1980s West Coast hip-hop, a coded form of resistance and collective identity. Rob is always obliquely working this shared ground between aesthetics and politics, in this instance the power of the

stylistic and visual challenges (rather than purely linguistic or discursive ones) that hip-hop made to police brutality and the criminalisation of the black male body in 1980s Los Angeles. But what's exciting for me about Rob's paintings is that they are never really determined by singular political or historical meanings – instead he focuses our attention precisely on objects as sites of overinvestment that continually resist these associations, maintaining their objecthood.

Although there's a way in which, then, this work is about failure: Rob's belief in the inexhaustibility of our relationship to objects, the infinite number of stories we might be able to tell, the infinite number of lives the object might live, creates the endless possibility of new stories, new forms, new experiences.

And that is probably the most important point, one that extends from Davis's work in the artist collective Law Office during the mid-1990s and his later collaborative painting practice with Mike Langlois. Art is a system, but it is a social system. Like language it can be both arbitrary and adaptive. Fundamentally it is about connectivity, the interpenetration of the thing itself and our experience of it.

Born in Chicago, now based in Brooklyn, Robert Davis has been creating work that abstracts the foundation substances of artistic practice – beer, wine, coffee, cigarette ash; this following an intense period of (supernatural, representational) collaborative painting with Michael Langlois, their work shown at MCA Chicago in 2009. Selected by Rashid Johnson, artist, New York.

http://artreview.com/features/2015_futuregreat_robert_davis/