

# UNTITLED

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reviews

## Michael Raedecker The Approach Gallery, London

Michael Raedecker's paintings are like finding a hair in the advocaat. They offer up a chilled world of nostalgic alienation dangling somewhere between retro modernism and naffness. They look empty and luscious and a little disgusting. From far off they are drab and on the page their coolness seems a bit flat, but in detail they are compelling.

The show at the Approach consisted of six paintings. Together they seemed like someone's idea of an American film - the locations of an ersatz 70's Western - a bungalow set on the plains, awesome mountain backdrops, picture windows, succulents. These are shown in an array of cinematic views- a longshot, a theatrically framed landscape, an interior, and two close ups. This combination confounds that old trick of suggesting a narrative which is never satisfied. Somehow characters have been emptied out without implying their departure and all that is left, is all that is shown - rooms and scenes and soft furnishings. They offer a short circuit without anecdote, in which the only character is oneself.

The painted spaces are empty rather than expansive. They are articulated by embroidered details - boulders and tree-trunks and shadows. These direct attention onto particular areas, but without explicit purpose. They are occasional, but far too intently made to seem casual. Wool is overstitched and layered in plump mounds. Knotted tangles and loose dangling loops allude to generalised vegetable matter. Stringy, flat, olive camouflage forms stylised backgrounds reminiscent of Paul Klee drawings. A range of mountains is built up in single strands. They are beautifully, but strangely formulated. The skittling between sparseness and detail skirts around modernist sensibilities. Michael Raedecker finds many of his houses in a magazine called *Vacation* and *Second Home* which has articles entitled *This is our Dream House*. They embody a pathetic optimism. His choices form an eloquent sample of design history- a pioneer style balcony in *Cue*, the low slung bungalow in *Monument* - shrine to a tawdry prefab modernism - and a classic modern wall-to-ceiling window in *Reverb*. Lacking the technological or personal mess of our time, they share a fantastical pared-down aesthetic. Gloops of chocolate milkshake, mud grey, and bleached greens compound this suggestion of modernism but go deeper.

The paint is mutely descriptive. It lies on the surface, in pools, as a wash, sometimes soaking through wool, sometimes marbled. At odds with its inertness, the embroidery creates illusionistic detail - sharp areas of colour and overworked texture. It describes objects in a stark, clear light. This clarity almost chokes on its metaphoric enlightenment by way of suggesting a rational world. Short stubby stitches make light-streaks on glass. Cotton is tautly stretched into languorous shadows. The needlework is astoundingly skillful, not for the variety of stitch, but as exquisitely observed drawing. In *Cue*, shade is knitted onto the undersides of wool fencing and grey thread shadows are cast in effortlessly arresting tones. Then the assiduous realism is poked at by three gold sequins sewn into the sky.

These embroidery nodes go way beyond any discussions of thread's sex. They act as ontological focal points. Michael Raedecker uses materials as if to generate a classification system or hierarchies of reality; stirred paint for rocks, wool for mountains and curtains and large plants, cotton for shadows. But they spill into each other and break down and



Michael Raedecker: *Pinch*, 1998 (acrylic and thread on linen)



Michael Raedecker: *Cue*, 1998 (acrylic and thread on linen)

anyway suggest a model which is internally meaningless. In contrast to the undifferentiated mass of paint, thread is less solid (a standard unit only so thick) but weirdly actual. The curtains are painstakingly built up from different thickness of wools and cotton (in graded tones of red, brown and green yellow), and the shag-pile rug is bobbed with milky pink-brown knots. It is what they would be made from in the world. But the apparent aptness of using wool or cotton only serves to underline the illusion. Equally one of the fascinations of creative embroidery, flower arranging or pasta collage is perverse substitution - such as using chopped eggs as rally wings in edible woodland scenes, Paint is as perverse but more familiar, Michael Raedecker mingles inappropriate stuff. He uses preposterous techniques (laying wool in patterns and then pulling it from the half dried paint) and decorative flourishes (leaves run through with gold thread like a trouser suit trim). He delights in restrained concentrations of dankness. Woolly trees are matted with paint like wet socks - a category error on a par with eating toast in the bath.

And up close these diffident images have disturbing subliminal stains - water-damage, fuzz and hairs lurking dirtily on the surface, It is as if some of the detritus evacuated by sleek functionalism has returned, Rather than talk about traces of life these allude to a world in which filth occurs randomly in tiny bursts (like spontaneously generating Mediaeval flies). Nature is without solace, The plains are moon like deserts. Plants are strange sci-fi things, fluff balls, bulboid bloods-ckers with fat wool over stitching and spiked stalks topped with horrid little worm heads of paint.

Seventeenth Century Dutch landscape artists, who had heard about, but never visited Italy, bathed the Dutch countryside in a golden Italianate light. Michael Raedecker's paintings approximate to scenes which might have been seen, though never visited. They collude with the possibility of travelling everywhere through TV or films. They seem familiar, but not - something like middle America cast in cool Northern light: somewhere between a TV planet and a National Geographic idea of wilderness.

A few years ago, Michael Raedecker made reproductions of Winston Churchill's paintings, This was working at a remove - making paintings of paintings by someone else, (who laid out his ideas in an essay on painting as a pastime). The paintings at *The Approach* extend this absenteeism and deferment. Their images are impersonal and familiar They seem doubly distant from their possible source, Instead of belonging to someone else they belong to no one else, Amongst the notes for his paintings Michael Raedecker has a list of words in English, often snatches of songs heard or remembered, When looking for a title he sometimes takes their meanings and matches one to an image. These act in the same way as the later paintings - as a part in translation which is rephrased to assume a seeming life of its own.

Michael Raedecker embroidered almost invisibly over Churchill's paintings with details of their provenance in matching colours. In his current work the sewing is less prescriptive - it needn't correspond to the background but it is in some way predetermined. The action remains the same, For Michael Raedecker, it is a meditative process which involves engagement and distance: working in close detail and then moving away to see it, He works 'a couple of steps ahead' with an image in his head. There are unpacked patches, Like drawing, sewing involves lines and moving from x to y, but its vagueness is always tangible (knots, matted stuff). It is more difficult to fade out cotton. But Michael Raedecker doesn't need to try. The places he creates are generalities onto which he embroiders the specifics of a possible world.

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