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# Landscape, Furniture, Painting

by *Edwina Ashton*

Michael Raedecker's paintings are like finding a hair in the advocaat. They offer up chilled worlds of nostalgic alienation. Restrained, luscious and troubling, from far off they are drab and on the page their coolness seems a bit flat, but in detail they are compelling. Paint lies on the surface, poured in pools or washed, soaking through wool, sometimes marbled, articulated by embroidery. Exquisite patchy details - mountains, curtains, shadows - direct attention onto particular areas but without explicit purpose. The materials act as ontological focal points that suggest classification: stirred paint for rocks, wool for large plants, cotton for shadows. But they spill into each other and break down to suggest the fragility of those systems by which we attempt to describe the world.

Raedecker's earlier work is imagined in the cool colour and light of 1970's television. Empty patios or driveways are described in hesitant stitching which breaks off as if half-remembering. In this frame you might be drawn to fill the blankness - with crime scenes or memories of walking home from school, or emptiness. Gradually the paintings have moved from what might have been seen to something more distant and secluded; a wilderness close to an imagined America cast in northern light. His first solo show, like a sequence from an ersatz Western, pictured awesome mountains, a bungalow on the plains, and cacti, arranged as longshot landscapes, an interior, and close-ups. These draw out the surrounding vastness. That old trick of suggesting a narrative that is never satisfied is confounded. Characters are emptied out without implying their departure and all that is left is all that is shown - rooms and scenes and soft furnishings, in which the only character is oneself.

With no action but seeing, Raedecker's paintings allow you to drift through time and space, through the immediate, near and immensely far off. Close up the ground is disturbed by water-stains, fuzz and hair. These are not traces of anything, but conjure up a world in which blots spontaneously generate, like a fantasy of pre-linguistic substance from which everything is formed. The monochrome surface washed with nearly invisible brushmarks does not seem made; it just seems to be there. The colours point to contemporary taste but also to an imaginary past or future: echoey illustrations of glimmery mud flats. Raedecker's buildings concentrate time, but un-specifically. They sample recent design from the lone pioneer to the prefab. The sparse details of these interiors reveal nothing messy or anecdotal. They neither record, nor project, nor symbolize an era safely from the present.

Retrospectively the houses become pathetically pared down. Many are found in the magazine *Vacation and Second Home*, as illustrations rather than photographs, accompanying articles called *Our Dream House*. They trace an image or maybe a utopian longing or contemporary nostalgia. In painting little is real. Raedecker's paintings don't just wrestle with representation but densely tangle it. His images of nature mimic how we read time from things, and objects from shapes and paint. Rocks still look fluid, like cooling lava. Their marbling skirts between stone, decorative paint finishes and torn linoleum. Mounds are trees. Shapes flounder between plants and pattern. Like something felt through a linguistic blanket, you identify but generally.

Raedecker dips into the gap between the knowable and the sensory. Highly tactile qualities belong both to the materials he uses and the objects they picture. These correspondences, the desire to name and to show the real are poked at. Seemingly natural but highly illusionist objects are wrung from the wrong stuff using curious techniques. String patterns mingle concentrations of dankness. Woolly trees are matted with paint like wet socks - a category error on a par with eating toast in the bath. But appropriateness is no guarantee. Curtains, made from what they might be in the world, only serve to underline the illusion.

A fascination of creative embroidery or pasta collage is perverse substitution - chopped eggs for fairy wings in edible woodland scenes. Paint is perverse, but it is more familiar. Thread is less solid than paint. It looks actual but is equally strange.

On another register, Raedecker's paintings dislodge spatial conventions. Often there is no horizon. The same mottled background stands in for land, sky and objects. Narrowing lines and stitches perform a diagram of three-dimensional space, pulling rooms back into views and onto the surface. The tracery delineates objects - and the framework by which we see them. Raedecker repeats illusory space while undermining it. He furtively dissects the positions of the viewer, the canvas and the painting, gliding between co-ordinates and scales. Vertical planes offer apparent openings but return masked abstractions as zipped Soviet jerseys. Raedecker's space is formed by its objects. When he inflects them, the ground tilts and we look obliquely over but never at. The reference point is indeterminate, the stable resting place deferred. Raedecker's *somewhere* might be the slim jetty, but also the painting, the gallery, everywhere and nowhere. Raedecker sees relations over reference. He uses extraordinary gaps to stretch and hold objects apart. Like Cy Twombly's spaces these gaps do not acknowledge the Kantian categories of space and time, but are / "the void" of Oriental compositions, merely

accentuated here and there by some calligraphy ... [and Valery's] "huge rooms of the Midi..."

the big pieces of furniture lost in them. The great emptiness enclosed - where time doesn't count: Raedecker plays on an airless association between place and solidity, object and containment. For, as the British philosopher J. L. Austin writes, the world is not made up solely of 'moderately sized dry goods' but equally problematic, amorphous things: piles, rivers, pictures in books or on walls, voices, vapours. Raedecker breaks up space, as within it the possibilities of differentiation are broken down. He suggests and blocks an equation between liquidity and freedom, and conversely between thread, definition and constraint. Slurried paint, inert and almost animate, liquefies and engulfs as it depicts. In *phantom*, a pool, the same colour as the ground, hovers over the painting. Neither a nothing nor a something, it is a blurt of ectoplasm demonstrating the malleability of every image, and a black hole where both meaning and its subject disappear. In a twilight of watered milk and sweating wool the visual condenses opaquely as it is revealed. The erosion of subject, imagery, and space paired with an insistence on lingering detail precipitates a fissure of pleasure that haunts the paintings.

Mimicking light, paint becomes a malevolent material force that reveals and dissolves objects. Dingy creams bind Raedecker's recent paintings into a hermetic world of off-white tennis shoes and leather Clutch bags. Sun-faded planes are infused with the possibility of escape. Seventeenth-century Dutch landscape artists, who had heard about but never visited Italy, bathed an imagined mountainous countryside in golden Italianate light. Michael Raedecker's almost invisible light cements rational but extraordinary worlds, approximate scenes that could be imagined through television or the cinema, though never visited. *kismet's* blank white tongue of paint, masquerading both as source and effect, becomes a blind hole that imitates and inverts natural light. At the Van Abbemuseum Raedecker painted the gallery walls two different grays. These 'made the space feel smaller and filtered light as if it were dimmed, reflected sunlight from the surface of the moon, or the sparse light in my paintings' - *extract*, a subterranean bedroom, lit up like a cinema screen. In this scene yellow cotton rays, seeming more outlandish than other kinds of light, unpick the fictions of cause and effect.

As depiction is loosened and overstated, Raedecker's most recent paintings are charged with untenable sensibility. Deathly colours and materials disintegrate and contaminate *extract*. In *guarantee* perception is undone by conflation; like a milles fleurs ground, the pink haired floor supports a gridded bed and together the two compress Mediaeval, Classical and Modernist perspectives. The moundy bed-head and flanking lamps seem as much prepared for a funeral as a holiday. These bedrooms picture the promise and conditions of love; 'the first thing we love ... is the scene which ... consecrates the object I am going to love,' Both too much and not enough, like their titles they reflect an enduring question of love and death: 'who will leave first?'

Michael Raedecker paints few people. Initially his series of old men, *tronies*, seems as inert as his spaces are subliminally alive. A *tronie* is slang for someone untrustworthy and Dutch for face. Rembrandt made *tronies* - 'face-pictures'; paintings of himself which he did not consider as portraits but as explorations of expression or costume. They attach no significance to identity and upset our concept of portraiture and subject. Raedecker's old men are not of anyone in particular, but illustrate conjecture. They are intelligible as pictures of old men and so question how any portrait can portray its subject. Their faces mask and parody maps of time. Too close, these features get lively. Tufts of wool are combed or sprout from crumpled pore-pricked skin. Embroidered blood-lined eyes dominate, focus and resist attention. The *tronies* seem unavoidably lonely, hollowed into widening cardigans; any sadness means we have already gone too far. They enact an idiot desire to read intention into matter.

Michael Raedecker's work repeats the past illegibly. The imagery is unknowable and familiar. It belongs to no one and Side-steps personal history. The sewing lays visible, while concealing how it is made and how we see. This action is, for Raedecker, a meditative process: working closely and moving away, both predetermined and subject to change. He sews 'a couple of steps ahead' with an image in mind. Planes of attention slip in embroidery, as the needle passes through the frame. Like drawing, sewn lines stretch between x and y, representing time as space. They cover and never reveal individual origins or routes but specify everything that might have been. Raedecker's paintings are profoundly philosophical and light. In their beautiful, curious formulation of embroidery and paint, estrangement and vagueness become tangible. Things and the gaps between them are materialized. They have odd and elusive titles, rarely adjectival, often both a noun and a verb. Like the illusory spaces they name, these soften the structures by which we represent our world. Michael Raedecker's paintings are of places that are neither solid nor nameable. They cannot exist simply in space and time. His work shows that reality, too, is neither this nor that, but both and neither. His possible worlds ask us to contemplate how the actual is possible.