



Jackson Slattery

Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and
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IMAGE CREDIT: Jackson Slattery, *Small Ambition*, watercolour and acrylic on wall, 2009, Image courtesy of the artist and Sutton Galleries, Melbourne

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Jackson Slattery

The stain and the shadow

“Painting from nature is not copying the object, it is realizing sensations”

-Paul Cézanne

Jackson Slattery paints not nature, but images. His chosen subject-matter are photographs which now, thanks to the coincidence of digital photography and the web, can be disseminated across the world in their millions. From this constantly updated digital archive Slattery selects the images for his paintings, turning most frequently to the amateur photography database, Flickr, a site which allows users to post their own personal snapshots for view and comment. Once the photograph has been selected, Slattery begins his labour of reproduction. Slattery can spend days, sometimes weeks, at this job, carefully and obsessively replicating the seemingly innocuous photographs into small, intimate water-colour paintings. The works are then presented alone, or, as in his recent show at Sutton Gallery’s Project Space, hung together in loose disjointed groupings of three or four images.

Looking at this grouping of paintings, it is often hard to discern any logic to the images that Slattery has selected to paint. But a closer look reveals there is a preoccupation with figures, places and things captured in moments of transition—a man reeling backwards, a branch broken in half, a house burning. Slattery is perhaps drawn to the way these images epitomize photography’s awkward fragmentation of life, its tendency to interrupt the flow of things. Such awkward in-between poses typify the conflicting desires that lie at the heart of Slattery’s practice. On the one hand, he seems to want to strip the images he finds of their contextual meaning, isolating them from their narrative context and their author, title and date. And yet, at the same time, Slattery gives life to these orphaned images, investing hours of tender care into their reproduction, and hanging them together to provide new stories which interlink

the images. In his Sutton show, Slattery encouraged viewers to imagine the disparate images he presented as documenting a common (but implausible) narrative—a night on the town with basket-baller Dennis Rodman.

This double-movement—the simultaneous erasure and creation of life in the image—is tied to the process of reproduction in Slattery’s work. In the infinitely reproducible world of the digital image, Slattery seems to say, a trace of life can always be found, even if it must be painted in. Slattery may have learned this lesson from the great master of the art of reproduction, Andy Warhol. In his own copies of photographs, Warhol used the unpredictable medium of the screen print. In doing so he realised not exact copies, but a series of prints each marked with their own unique sequence of marks and stains. The message of the screen-print is that while the reproducibility of the image may drive us to desire the same, the task of reproduction will always leave a stain: the telling sign of the human hand.

In Slattery’s small, sensitive paintings, the stain of the human hand is inescapable—for indeed water-colour is itself a stain. In each reproduced photograph, Slattery’s controlled mastery of the watery medium softens the stultified shapes and hard lines of the digital images with a shuddering warmth, forever marking the copies with the means of their reproduction. But more than these warm contours, Slattery’s careful application of paint to paper, coats the figures depicted in a penumbra of shadowy transparency. In the end, Slattery’s act of painting does more than merely copy the image—it also brings out the shadowy forms that lie latent in it. Slattery’s paintings recapture a flickering movement that the digital images he uses wish to immobilize and deny, presenting what writer Paul Carter calls the dark lines of ‘living shadows’ that constitute and occupy our world.

Slattery’s new work presented here, *Small Ambition* (2009), continues this pursuit of living shadows. However, the shadowy forms that previously dwelt only subtly in his paintings are now fully materialized, creeping up the wall and across the roof of the gallery. The basis for this work is again a photograph recovered from the depths of the Flickr archive: a sober image of a kitchen or lounge corner that has been blackened with smoke. The same conflicting desires that defined his paintings are at work here. Slattery simultaneously denies the narrative of the source-image, while attempting to create a new one by reproducing it into a new context. However, it cannot be missed that this new work represents a radical shift in scale. The tight frame that constrained his earlier water-colours has here been completely overpowered by the towering plume. There is something almost destructive in this new work—a recklessness that also marks an interesting new critical direction for Slattery’s work. The stain that gave such delicacy to his small paintings here trembles with the effort of reproduction on such a grand scale. Even as it strives to demonstrate its power to recreate, to generate a new life for the strange smoky shape it reproduces, the hand-painted scrawl appears to defy and deface the very space that gives validity to its reproductive powers—the white walls of the gallery.

Slattery’s reproductions offer more than a copy—they portray the shadowy forms of a world in motion, and betray the stain of the hand that gives life to the image.

Nicholas Croggon

