

KÖNIG GALERIE

**JOHN SEAL | BEHIND THE GLARING BLAZE OF THEIR CHRISTIAN NAMES THE OBJECTS
QUIETLY EMANATE THEIR UNFATHOMED TALES LIKE THE DIM LIGHT OF DISTANT STARS**

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ST. AGNES | CHAPEL
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"It should not matter whether the objects in this show are paintings or sculptures," John Seal told me one recent night at his studio, "but it does." And he is right. While it might be terminologically accurate to call the objects in Seal's first show at KÖNIG GALERIE 'polychrome reliefs' – a format which itself has a long and specific history, particularly within Christian ecclesiastical art – the problems and possibilities that these works raise are ultimately concerned with painting.

While he has also made sculptures and installations, Seal's primary devotion to the medium of painting has to do with his enduring belief in its seriousness and profundity, its philosophical and perceptual complexity, and its continuing centrality in Western visual culture. After the embattled and disparaged medium has been subject to decades of attacks, Seal sees its current resurrection as a kind of ironic, self-mocking 'painting-lite'. Do not mistake the humour in Seal's work for painting in that vein. Remember that 'wit', in English, is a synonym both for 'humour' and 'intelligence'; when Seal employs humour in his work, he uses it to lubricate and season our digestion of challenging and complex ideas about perception, mimesis and knowledge.

The painted relief, as seen in Seal's new works, is a tautology: a representational convention through which three-dimensional forms are overlaid with the painted illusion of form. The practice is in one sense absurd and hilarious, a paradoxical collision of representational techniques that arises from an excessive desire to transmit the information of the picture. In the process, the representation starts to break itself apart: from the sides, the picture becomes nonsensical and the illusion disintegrates.

Seal does not intend us to fall back on considerations of representational formats, however, but on the vivid and irreducible experience of the physical world itself. Within this work there is embedded a protest against the pervasive (un)reality of the mediated digital environment; against the situation in which every image becomes flattened and interchangeable. When that happens, he says, the world is reduced to currency – exchangeable tokens in an economy of knowledge. (The fact that Seal's emphatically three-dimensional reliefs defy convenient photographic representation is not

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coincidental here.) He advocates for an endless search, in place of knowing cynicism. Seal tells me that he believes that the world is not merely an aggregate of our knowledge of it, but rather that knowledge aspires to represent and explain the world, but always falls short.

A fruit bowl might seem like a somewhat inert subject for a contemporary painting, but to Seal it is a symbol of sensual abundance, of ravishing visual pleasure, of global transmission (of goods and images) and unfathomable scientific achievement. It points to the timeless scope of painting in order to summon a vision of the extraordinary through the lens of the apparently mundane. In these works the fruit (rendered in a realistic style) is figuratively contained by bowls painted with colourful abstract impasto marks that seem at first to be stylistically incompatible, but which are actually analogous to the fruit arrangements in their exuberant and eclectic tone.

As for the frames that Seal hand-carved - like the fruit and the bowls - from basswood, these too pose an ontological conundrum. Are they fancy or are they faux-fancy? Are they stage-props or are they special artist-designed frames, akin to the integrated frames of Georges Seurat or Howard Hodgkin? Such distinctions are not easy to make; even traditional antique frames are generally made of wood covered with gold leaf, often carefully hand-painted to give them the added simulation of age. Sometimes the frame might cost more than the painting itself.

Historically, frames were designed to protect the canvas, but they quickly became signifiers of status. (If something is worth protecting, the logic goes, it must therefore be valuable. If it is worth protecting with something that is itself valuable, it must be priceless.) In domestic and gallery situations, however, the frame also became a way of quarantining a picture in its own ontological zone; within the boundary of the gilt frame, different rules apply than in the room outside it.

Ironically, Seal's frames have the very opposite effect. He has removed the insulating barrier between the viewer and the image. The frame can no longer enclose or confine the painting because it has been consumed by the painting's visual order. Furthermore, the bowl itself actually seems to be overflowing the edge of the frame; it refuses to be contained. By also revealing sections of the bare wall that would normally be obscured, he has completed a total cross-contamination between the exhibition context and the painting itself, its interior and exterior, its surface and its substrate, its subject and its wider significance.

Jonathan Griffin