

Where Sugar Lives
Nick Austin

December 6, 2015–January 30, 2016
(Laurel Doody, Los Angeles)

Nick's work had always explained something to me about bureaucratic paths that had previously been bewildering to the point that I would wade into negativity. Paintings of envelopes with arms hitchhiking seemed to be taking back an impersonal, administrative space as one's own by determining their own journey. Envelope windows containing the sharks that they actually are; an attacker approaching through the letterbox unsuspectingly. Paintings on newspaper of aquariums, fish swimming up and down the columns but never beyond the page. Movement is always tracked and contained in these works, rationalised, like applying for permission to breathe.

I was excited to see that in *Where Sugar Lives* each work was delivered in Nick's droll tone as usual. Even the dryness of the pencils was excruciatingly funny, as if a chicken's talons had scratched the marks on delicately. Oblique situations meet alternative experiences of themselves – a right angle toothbrush – more fab-splanation than man-splanation.

Mortality becomes cyclical in *Toothbrush Cycle*, one avoided cavity at a time. In *Stupidity*, Avital Ronell asserts “tests such as those administered to children invariably belong to the realm of stupidity. To the extent that they demand an answer and instrumentalize the moment of the question, they escape the anguish of the indecision, complication, or hypothetical redoubling that characterizes intelligence.” The eight drawings and a dyptich constitute the exhibition dwell in this hesitation. There are what first appear to be simple philosophical ruminations on time and space and where things exist. I can only take stabs at interpretation, before stochasticity submerges me.

Many Happy Returns is a drawing of a celebratory gift card, depicting the same card, that depicts the same card ... etc. In the Miracle Mile of Los Angeles, where Laurel Doody spaces out, the plot of the film *Inception* might be an apt comparison. The recurring card offers an experience of infinity for us to stare down. Like the *Allergies* [...] chart, and indeed the hang of the show, there is no perceivable hierarchy and no law or choice in experience as we plummet down the titular rectangle of congratulations. It knows no limit. Ronnell recalled Brecht noting that intelligence is finite but stupidity is infinite. Ronnell explains that the certitudes of stupidity – we only need to reflect on a U.S election campaign for examples – means that rather than asking stupid questions, one might override the question entirely. Nick certainly circumvents a question, albeit with deliberate slowness that constructs an opening for the optimism of indecision rather than the speed of solution.

The drab *Allergies Survey*, is almost an infographic, nearly the fastest way to transmit information to a one-click audience with increasingly sensitive constitutions.

The Invention of Bananagrams: a message sent by banana which is then eaten to deliver in written form.

The Town Wrist Watch is a drawing of a brick wall right-angled pipe. A spider is poised close to a watch that the pipe wears. The geometry of the brinks and right-angle of the pipe indicates the town is orderly. The framing of the drawing magnifies the threat of time and the possibility of a natural attack from the spider. Neurosis runs viscously through the pipe.

Surreal Keyboard is a drawing of a pillow at night inscribed with the three lines of letters that you find on a QWERTY keyboard, although the last line consists only of Z's. A keyboard is what you use to type language on computers. A pillow is what you rest your head on when you sleep. Often people working with numbers and letters end up counting in their dreams. And Zs are the caricature of sleep in writing. A restless administrator in bed with a corrupt pillow? Freelancer's nightmare? Aerial surrealism?

Recalling an earlier work, *Self-hating Cactus*, a painting in which sewing needles perforate a cactus, I wonder if this current work's messenger has shifted from an emotional state as it begins to decay in form—and I mean decay here, not dematerialise. Charts and bananagrams and toothbrushes; physical problems. A wristwatch versus an inbuilt clock.

These are only guesses though. The work has some emotional resonance, knowing that Nick, a recent father, is revisiting the 70s children literature he grew up on. Some of the literature is available to view in the Laurel Doody office/bedroom.

The exhibition *Where Sugar Lives* distracts the infograph itself. It consumes the message and revisits postponing. Like the dull roar of a cavity, one sip of coke at a time, it opens up the first knowing, the second knowing, the third knowing and then finally the multiplicity of the points of unknowing.

- *If you'll pardon the pun*
- *What pun?*
- *Oh, wasn't there one? I'm sorry*
- A Bit of Fry & Laurie

- *George Egerton-Warburton, 2016*