

*But how can we hope to save ourselves in that which is most fragile?*¹

All manner of ephemeral objects and substances dwell in Nick Austin's dusty, painted grounds. Smoke, rain, envelopes, odd socks, spare change, matchboxes, cigarettes and tissues are layered over corrugated plastic, paper plates, cloth and sheets of newspaper. In a world that privileges the new, where things are outmoded long before they fall into decay and ruin, Austin looks to the perishable and insignificant, things forgotten in the rush, slight, overlooked, not precious, easy to lose, not thrown out but not really kept either.

Things happen in Austin's anaemic paintings and somnolent sculptures – new forms emerge out of other forms, materials become something other than what they were, all at their own sedate pace. Paint layered on sheets of newspaper, sometimes dense and at other times speckled and translucent, obscures the medium's information-value, opening up space for digression, reflection and incidental results: pages of an open book morph into birds in flight, pieces of string become drops of rain. The effect of these transfigurations is not drastic or dramatic; they engender a small wobble or hiccup in our perception and cognition, akin to the uncomfortable feeling one has after looking at a word for so long that it appears unfamiliar, misspelt, foreign. As does: does.

*Were I to attempt to describe even the most minuscule fraction of noteworthy events that befall me when travelling about my library, I should never finish.*²

Austin reads a lot of books but his work is not academic or textual, it does not refer to

1
Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Patrick Creagh (trans), Vintage Books, London and New York, 1993, p 6.

2
Xavier de Maistre, *Voyage Around My Room*, 1794, Stephen Salarelli (trans), New Directions, New York, 1994, p 64.

3
Nick Austin, 'Poem for a Nerd', unpublished, 2009.

literature. Rather, Austin gives visual form to an otherwise abstract, ineffable quality that is not inherent in language but can be summoned by it and experienced in the act of reading. Austin channels this sensation into isomorphic compositions, borrowing from the logic of ideograms, crosswords, puns, jokes and concrete poetry. The transition – with its hidden ingredients of digression, distraction, fatigue, comprehension, incomprehension, repetition, remembering, misremembering, word-association and so on – is necessarily awkward and always incomplete. Austin's work moves in the non-space between the two processes of 'reading' and 'looking', it at once resists becoming fully concrete and evades re-capture by language.

*Poem for a nerd
Two words,
actually there's nine.*³

The modesty, slowness and economy of Austin's practice stands both in opposition and as antidote to the demand that art be fundamentally special; born of a mythical flash of inspiration. Renderings of the utterly contingent, Austin's soft-edged, blurry forms hover on the borders of abstraction, ready to dissolve into milky voids and watery oblivion, while his perishable materials disclose the latent threat of dissolution. Austin's works make no claim to Modern painting's ideals of timelessness, universality or transcendence; on the contrary their power lies in their insignificance, their ephemerality, their ability to escape.

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Left:
Ye olde age 2009,
acrylic on glass, frame,
private collection,
courtesy of the artist and
Gambio Castle, Auckland.