

Chris Hanlon: A Stone in a Cloud

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[Domo Baal](#), London, until June 4



I've been on a fairly ad hoc London commute for the last couple of years, but how I've managed to miss Chris Hanlon's paintings before now is a mystery. They are extraordinary. I am agog at this selection and wondering how many painters quietly loathe him and his skills. When I talk to Hanlon's gallerist Domo Baal about the work, the artist she describes sounds fully switched on to the potential pitfalls of these works as desirable and technically adept commodities, as well as the rollcall of artists he is indebted to. Baal shows me a small work Hanlon sent to her without explanation in the post. Later discussions revealed the idea behind it – the making process involved pulling the just-tacky surface off the canvas and sanding the subject back to an abstract visual minimum – was to find something Richter hadn't already done with paint. 'What Richter Didn't Do (in Paint)': it could be the title of a very select group show, or an art-world-musical urban myth.

The first encounter in the foyer space sets an unexpected tone in contrast with that implied by the press image. 'Interrupted Blue' (2018) is possibly the most minimal painting Hanlon has made to date. Even while knowing these paintings are of found images, it's only after seeing the rest of the exhibition that you realise this is just as faithful a figurative portrait as any of the other works on show. Tiny surface marks, evidence of underpainting and scuffs are the only and very slight clues as to what it is we are looking at. And this enjoyable sense of ill ease continues up the stairs with 'Communication' (2017), a candy-striped, origamified histology slide of an abstract composition, or possibly just an image of pressed fabric or paper sweetshop bags sandwiched in a very niche reference book. Again, I am not entirely sure of how to navigate this as a rendering of the real, but am happy to remain associatively wandering.



'Panes of Glass', 2018. All photos by Andy Keate

There appears to be no obvious hierarchy in Hanlon's personal image search history. His selection for this edit has the same random feel of the everyday visual experience: from street-side to the screen. And they generally depict quite perfunctory things, if elevated to a high degree by the act of manufacture. 'Panes of Glass' (2018) at the top of the stairs (and the titular image of a hand holding a stone at the gallery threshold), which does exactly what it says on the tin, yet is also a masterclass in the alchemical potential of paint, have me momentarily concerned I'm at the peak point of the experience before it's begun. However, the salon arrangement of works in the main gallery immediately extinguishes that.



I imagine the major curatorial issue here would be what to leave out. This is a very strong group, but seeing other works by Hanlon in the office, I'm not sure he has ever made a duff one. The hang also has a curiously editorial sensibility. I'm reminded of early Noughties art-mag scientific manual layout design trends, and also blog image-gallery formatting preferences. As, for all the surreal inferences this set of thematically unconnected images throws out, there is an air of empirical authority about the collective. Let's not forget, though, it is an extremely impressive room in its own right, and one likely to stir up all kinds of unattainable aspirations. Then again, there's the artefactual image of a jug on the right-hand wall – possibly depicted as a part of a dps in a reference book – the shine of the glaze on it barely giving away its status as a painting, even up close.

There is, by design, no single focal point upon entry, we are enveloped by imagery on all sides: if for a possible moment of power play between the two largest works in the series, hung like the leaders of the image groups they preside over, head-to-head, on opposing walls. 'Playtime' (2019), to the right, could be a Morandi-style still-life study of a set of empty, cheap white frames, but the expert, almost iridescent mix of complementary colours that make up the dominant institutional grey of the image operates much like a synthetic skin, alerting us to the presence of another layer, likely as a result of a printed process. You can almost smell the whiff of leaflet chemicals. The audacious 'Paper' (2019), a painting of a photographed piece of recently-folded paper, is its matt-pink, crisp opponent that, conversely, leaves one thinking more about sculpture than two-dimensional image.



Hanlon takes us everywhere imagery is found, using paint in ways that ape the different properties of technological processes and connect us with a possible source. The hyperreality of a shiny-leaved rubber plant, 'Office Plant' (2019), brings to mind the shouty and over-bright conditions of an instructional video, while its obvious pair in this game of blended Happy Families, another plant titled 'Day Sleeper' (2019), might be an enlarged postcard swatch of a Renaissance painting. Elsewhere, the monochrome view of a long-haired girl from behind speaks of art-house cinematic production values, the surface of the canvas almost reverberating slightly as if this might be a single-frame on pause.



In one sense, the viewer is given a lot more than the whole picture with these paintings, as a result of the forensic level of attention given to the condition of the source materials Hanlon has chosen. While his inclusion/possible exclusion of certain details, or style of pictorial editing is designed to leave one aware of the fact he is not interested in offering a complete story, rather, a virtual, meticulously arranged trail of breadcrumbs back to a gingerbread house that might be just as we imagined it, or filtered beyond all recognition. To know the answers or the pictorial 'truth' in any case would be to hamper, or even void, the narrative journey he sets up for us in and around the image economy.

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