

Here as elsewhere these rogue elements appear like the eerie results of a double exposure.

Swain's titles offer a way in, a chance to impose meaning. They suggest journeys, travels to unknown destinations, the potential for chance encounters. Stairs keep reappearing. In *Compass Concoked Bearings*, a large cushion, furnishings and flowers are spun into a kaleidoscopic whirl, where red and blue staircases offer an escape out the back of this vortex. Like a ransacked room, everything has been turned topsy-turvy. Here as elsewhere the over-painting destroys the perspective of the photographs beneath, catapulting everything towards the surface. But from here perspective is reintroduced in new, more deliberate terms. Lines mark out hard edges and chequerboard elements recur in many as a kind of shorthand for depth. *Started by Dark* is a floor, a wall, a staircase all in bold black and white checks, the result an oppressive, disorienting, damp-looking Kafkaesque cell.

*Bring them together before they meet* sees the original newsheet rotated through 95°, the car – the key visible element that remains – has been tilted up onto its side. Some of the text remains visible; a bridge has been added as well as a large strip of chequerboard. At the centre are two wheels driving a belt; this painted mechanical element recalls works of the Dadaists and in particular the collages of Schwitters. Indeed there are strong and multiple references to key moments in Modernism – there is something of the Futurists' fascination with speed; there is a penchant for disorientation that defined the Vorticists and a deconstruction and fragmentation of images that of course creates a tie to Cubism. That Swain's works remain firmly anchored to their source material, taking a sheet or fragment of a newspaper as their base, is significant. They are connected to a specific reality, the concerns with temporality are reinforced and the paintings acquire an ephemeral delicacy. Allowing the sources to remain apparent it makes it hard for the viewer not to scrutinise them, trying all the time to decipher what lies beneath. Eventually, however, it becomes apparent that this can only get you so far. At a certain point you hit a wall and reach the realisation that the image needs to be read for what it now is. They are like fragments of dreams, incomplete memories that come together into a jumbled narrative. And it is precisely here that Swain's talent lies – in his ability to confound our expectations and make us question our powers of perception. ■

SARA HARRISON is a freelance journalist.

## ■ Neil Zakiewicz

Bearspace London January 13 to February 11

What artistic endeavour could be more romantically heroic than the act of carving monumental figures from huge blocks? This is exactly what Neil Zakiewicz does, bringing forth giant raised fists and pointing fingers, following an ancient tradition that runs right through Classicism, Socialist Realism, and on

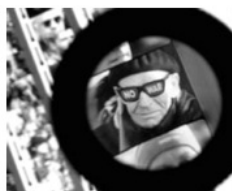


Tony Swain  
*Bring them together before they meet* 2005

into the tastes of contemporary dictators. In other words, a tradition that is now obvious, clichéd, and kitsch.

And Zakiewicz doesn't stop there; his imagery not only re-enacts these vacuous gestures of power, but also refers to the act of art making itself. *Pencil Holder*, 2005, is a huge clenched fist that holds aloft a bunch of coloured pencils. *The Brush*, 2006, meanwhile, consists of a raised hand – resting on an oversized palette and easel – that points its index finger to the heavens while grasping a giant paintbrush. The iconography that Zakiewicz has chosen ensures that the links between power, tradition, the heroic artist, and God are all made quite clear.

None of these are things that Zakiewicz believes in, however. This is obvious from his choice of materials. Take



## THE ANIMATORS

17 December 2005 - 25 February 2006

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Angel Row Gallery

An Angel Row Gallery touring exhibition curated by Angela Kingston, image: Dryden Goodwin

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Neil Zakiewicz  
Pencil Holder 2005



*Pencil Holder*, the giant fist has been carved not from marble, but a white block of heavy-duty upholstery foam. This curious material has a glistening, frothy surface, like a cross between Carrara marble and steamed milk, but it is beginning to oxidize, discolouring to a filthy, cigarette-stain, quinone yellow. So the surface of the sculpture, while initially suggesting tradition and permanence, in fact undermines these readings through the failings of the synthetic, modern material.

Beyond its surface properties, the foam also – quite literally – fails to stand up for its own iconic imagery. The pencils that it attempts to hold aloft are made not from foam, but heavy, metre-long rods of wood, which bend the carved hand down until it only stays upright because the bottom end of one of the pencils rests on the sculpture's foam base. As the front of the base is indented by the pencil, so it is also raised up at the back, pulled forward due to this cantilevering of the hand. The clenched fist – symbol of strident power – is here made weak, impotently distorted under the weight of the very tools that it tries to thrust heroically skywards.

The second foam-hand sculpture, *The Brush*, may not sag under the weight of its implement, but the huge wooden

brush it holds is out of scale – just a bit too large – making it unwieldy and inelegant. It is obvious that this hand, which is installed in the gallery's shop-window space, would only be able to make the crudest of marks with such a tool. But then does the hand, which is made from a blue foam that is dappling green as it ages, want to use the brush anyway? It seems less concerned with holding the brush than it is with pointing symbolically skyward. But the gesture here is ridiculous; the sculpture has as much to do with the oversized foam hands at gridiron games as it does with the hand of the artist, as much to do with the National Lottery's it-could-be-you motif as it does with the Michelangelo biopic *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. Rather than making the gesture seem potent and meaningful, the scale and material renders it crude and inane. Precisely the parody Zakiewicz was after.

The third and final work in the exhibition, which is entitled 'Monumental', is a wooden sculpture, *Stub*, 2006. This is a thick log of beech that has been turned into a smooth column standing 120cm high with a 48cm girth. Painted gloss brown, Zakiewicz has then 'sharpened' it with a chainsaw and painted its tip so that it becomes an oversized pencil stub: a worn-down, emasculated column, an anti-monument to exhausted artistic endeavour.

It's clear that this is an exhibition of shortcomings and failings, concerned with avoiding both the mythologising power of art as well as mythologising the power of the artist. And yet, in its own way, it is also a celebration of low-key creativity, of humble artistic activity stripped of its grandiose baggage. The carving of the hands is more than competently handled – a skill Zakiewicz learned as a youth – but he leaves it deliberately rough; he has hacked and sawed at the foam with a bread knife, leaving gestural ripples, grooves, and jagged edges. Visually and tactilely, the sculptures are extremely engaging objects.

For all their attacks on artistic traditions, there is a real sense of joy in the act of creation within these works. What the exhibition disparages are the trappings of creativity, the simple act of making is celebrated. And Zakiewicz enables his work to remain simple because he deflates any potential aggrandising of the creative act that his practice may otherwise infer; he gets his retaliation in first. ■

DAVID BARRETT is an artist.

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