

FOLD

ALEX EMSLEY

BY ASHRAF JAMAL

In the Barnard Gallery booth at the 2017 Johannesburg Art Fair, over a period of four days, two paintings by Alex Emsley rotated – a vase of flowers and a plastic sachet of boiled sweets. The execution is meticulous, the affect hyperreal. And yet, these are not paintings enamoured by the skill of their execution – they are not self-aware. And neither after the Dutch fascination with memento mori are they odes to Thanatos – views to eternal life, while enthralled by life's mortal coil.

And neither are they mere painterly exercises in art for art's sake. Rather, after Merleau-Ponty, these are paintings that kindle a wonder within the world – a world which they do not arrest; whose limit they do not refuse. For these are not paintings that simply fix what is seen, and neither do they exchange the seen, the visible, for the invisible. Rather, I think that in these two paintings, Emsley has revealed our connections to the things – the structures, colours, forms – in and through which we rediscover our conjoined existences, our oneness.

Emsley declares that he loves “the creation of convincing illusions”. But is this truly all that these paintings – titled *Logo* and *Sticky* – communicate to us? Are they merely a throw-back to the vanitas tradition or the 19th-century's quasi-scientific fascination with naturalism? If this were the case, I don't think the artist would be championing Epicurus – the title of another still life – or welcoming the “return to the senses”. The titles on his exhibitions – ‘The Art of Humanity’, ‘The Seeing Eye’, ‘Anyway the Wind Blows’, ‘Verf’ (Colour) – further underscore that these oils on canvas are not reducible to some vainglorious pretension to objectivity.

Sticky is the title Emsley gives to a painting of sweets tucked inside a thin film of plastic. The tactility of the word, the snag it invokes, makes it difficult to remove ourselves – for Emsley evokes a stickiness that soils, imprints, renders indelible that which holds, that which is held.

Is it too much to ask whether this painting also allows for lyricism and strangeness, for a bond as indissoluble, as familiar, as it

“A discussion is not an exchange or a confrontation of ideas, as if each formed his own, showed them to the others, looked at theirs, and returned to correct them with his own ...

Whether he speaks up or hardly whispers, each one speaks with all that he is, with his ‘ideas’, but also with his obsessions, his secret history.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

remains infinitely strange? Is it not the wakefulness of Emsley's eye, his ability to follow *through*, that permits me to claim this painting an exercise in immanence – a ‘rebirth of existence’? After Bakewell, can one not also say that *Sticky* conjures “the physical lusciousness of life”? For, as I understand it, one senses that all the artist's senses are here engorged, as though throbbing with the consciousness of mind and flesh.

Simone de Beauvoir echoes this immersive sensation. As a child, standing with greedy gaze before the window of a sweet shop, Beauvoir recalls “the luminous sparkle of candied fruits, the cloudy lustre of jellies, the kaleidoscopic inflorescence of acidulated fruitdrops – green, red, orange, violet – I coveted the colours themselves as much as the pleasures they promised me.” Later, as an adult in post-war New York, Beauvoir not only drinks in the colours of traffic lights, she wants to eat them, like the way she “wanted to crunch flowering almond trees, and take bites out of the rainbow nougat of the sunset”.

Something to this effect was also at work as I stood in the Barnard Gallery booth beneath its single guided light. All of life was singled out in a moment of apprehension, for here I, too, entered Merleau-Ponty's fleshy fold. Emsley's attentiveness to the engorged colours and forms of things – a vase of pink roses, a packet of boiled sweets – returned me to the colours and forms sharply etched in my own childhood. Or then again, they also conjured Aldous Huxley's drug-induced “doors of perception”.

It is this lusciousness that, for Merleau-Ponty, makes a conversation, a touch, a moment in time also something that is, exquisitely, out of time. A disconnect that also connects, this insight makes for some of the most intriguing engagements with the art of the world, art in the world – its ‘lyricism’, its ‘strangeness’, its inescapable definable fold.

Ashraf Jamal is a writer and teacher. His collected essays on contemporary South African art, *In the World*, is published by SKIRA.



TOP LEFT: Alex Emsley, *Sticky*, 2017. Oil on board, 400 x 500mm. RIGHT: Alex Emsley, *Logos*, 2017. Oil on board, 500 x 550mm. BELOW: Barnard Gallery solo presentation of work by Alex Emsley at Joburg Art Fair 2017, installation image. © Nina Lieska. Images courtesy of the artist and Barnard Gallery.