

Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, City Library and Arts Centre, Fawcett Street, Sunderland, SR1 1RE

Jeffrey Dennis: Ringbinder
NGCA, Sunderland
24 July - 17 October 2015
Review by Zara Worth

Curated by Andrew Hunt, 'Ringbinder' at NGCA reinserts Jeffrey Dennis as a significant player in contemporary painting. Various walls now removed, the recently unenclosed main gallery space hosts Dennis' information-laden paintings and objects made between 2011-2015; some so fresh that the paint may not even be dry. Mediated through Dennis' unobtrusive style and unwieldy layered combinations of imagery from numerous personal, public and historical sources whilst discarding fallacious forgone 'rules' of painting, there is a slight sense of urgency in showcasing these works; whose structures, forms and subject-matter offer a modern-day parable for the prevalent networked cultures resulting from everyday technological practices.

The scene is set by 'The Artist successfully levitating in the Studio' (2011), a work which checks-off some distinctly 'Dennis' motifs: the trademark veil of bubbles hanging in the foreground; hinted structures, their lines borrowed from William Morris designs; metal ligatures from a technical handbook of fixtures and fittings. These limbs and meshworks reach across the pictorial plane, framing and supporting stranded rectangular cameos of the artist in his studio and depicting his personal locale from imagery of his own and appropriated photos. This particular painting pays tribute to pre-eminent performance artist Bruce Nauman, the likes of whom Dennis had disregarded whilst a student stubbornly committed to his beloved painting practice. Still painting, Dennis now ruefully acknowledges the conceptual artists he succeeded, having left the Slade in 1980 amidst a resurgence of interest in painting. This small work pays tribute to the legacy of performance art, which imbued Dennis' art-school education, and painting's fantastical ability to realise on canvas the gravity-defying feat that Nauman was unable to fulfil.

The recurring employment of connective motifs throughout Dennis's works demonstrate his practice's pertinence to current concerns not limited to the trajectory of painting. Dennis approaches conditions through his visual vernacular, in a gangly muddling of personal and public affairs. In 'The Flowers that Came Again' (2012), a latticework of orange and blue bubbles part to expose vignettes copied from personal and publicly available images depicting the locality of his North London home; a personal psycho-geography transformed into universally recognisable landmarks after the death of Mark Duggan in 2011. The shooting was felt as a chain reaction, sparking riots in London and beyond which became distilled into key images such as the burning building which had held a family furniture business. These images became embedded in the public-psyche, and the nexus of contributing factors leading to the riots became as entangled as Dennis' painted wires, which like connective tissues hold the painting together. Dennis joins the dots between his subjective entry point and his wider context, neatly acknowledging and contextualising our positions as nodes within a networked society.

Social media was instrumental in connecting and mobilising the rioters, whose swift and violent activities took the country by surprise. Communicative digital platforms, particularly Blackberry Messenger, played a key role during the string of riots consequential to the shooting, being used by rioters to quickly and informally take action. Ironically, social media was also used by the police to make arrests after rioters bragged about their stolen goods online. Dennis' complexly layered paintings, referencing Jean Luc Godard's dissipating coffee bubbles from 'Two or Three Things I Know About Her' (1967) and daydreams about clouds of washing-up liquid bubbles floating upon kitchen sink water, metaphorically zoom from micro to macro conjuring the internet sublime. The skeletal connective wires stretching across the paintings evoke the hyper-connectivity of Web 2.0,

while the amalgamation of photograph-scale cameos sitting within Dennis's bubble meshwork is reminiscent of a computer desktop.

The object-paintings, constructed from a mishmash of items including U-bends and the top of a conifer, become stage sets inhabited by (often) blue-collar workers, who look into the painting from the foreground, weighting the works and prompting a self-consciousness of our position as spectators. Their inhabitation of these painted stages symbolises the roles we play in life and online; and, as labourers, they represent the often hidden, supportive system of society. Dennis's figurative dreamscapes allegorise the convergence of the public and the personal under Web 2.0 signing of new forms of connectivity through a fresh and visually generous approach to post-internet painting; 'Ringbinder' is a phenomenal collection of works.