

Andrew Putter reviews “Asleep inside you”

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Kate Gottgens' new exhibition of paintings is the work of an artist at the height of her powers. Constellated in small, intense groups, the 80 or so works reveal the sensibility of someone unafraid to confront shadows and wounds with a dispassionate tenderness.

Made over the last year, the works are loosely based on found photographs, mostly culled from secondhand shops and the internet. In the hands of a less accomplished painter, this broad range of references – animals, faces, figures, places – might have devolved into a meaningless mishmash, but Gottgens has given each subject its own, singular life and at the same time convincingly linked them in a painterly universe of her own invention. She has an exquisitely refined sensitivity to paint, a rare ability to remind us of the extraordinary expressivity of the medium, turning the tired, familiar surface of a small canvas into something as haunting, as varied and melancholic, as the human skin.

Most notable is Gottgens' palette: she is a consummate colourist. Having shown in her works made during the 80's and 90's that she can easily handle naturalistic colour, in this exhibition she brings her considerable skill to bear on a muted range of bitumen-browns and ash-greys, modulating here and there into cool pinks, and blues, the colour of a still, grey sky on a flat sea.

Gottgens also knows how to draw. In this body of work she moves with an enviable confidence between the representational and the abstract. She is not afraid to capture the essence of a subject with a few loose marks of her brush, knowing just how much of a thing to include – and more importantly – how much to omit. Goya and Velazquez immediately spring to mind – both artists whose brush effortlessly found the space between naturalism and pure mark, and both artists who used black as a colour.

'Asleep inside you' is Gottgens title for this new body of work. It conveys a sense of the fertility of things, of the life that is coiled up in them ready to connect to new opportunities for expression. It suggests how we are implicit in and immersed in each other and in the worlds we inhabit. It's about 'painting life in the face of death'. And it points to the unconscious as a vast reservoir of inorganic and organic beings – gestures, forms, constellations – that paintings like those of Kate Gottgens liberate in order for us to see and act anew. Don't miss this show.