

(Un)Knowing the (Un)Known

I have never met Matt Magee. We've never spoken. Not in person. Not on the telephone. Yet we share much in common and are equally aware of our curiously congeneric relationship. We have the same name. We're both married. We're both gay. We both love art and do our best to make a living out of it – he makes it; I sell it. But the real germ of our nexus lies in the fact we're both slightly obsessed with #Instagram. See, I even gave it its own #hashtag. Did it again. I can't help myself.

Social media - and especially Instagram - tends to forge friendships between like-minded souls in an accelerated fashion. Words and pictures proffered by complete strangers can have a marked impact on oneself, to the point where you identify – on a deeply personal level – with their electronic 'show and tells'. This ambient familiarity kickstarted mine and Matt's connection on Instagram and has nourished what is a, now, prized 'insta-relationship' of mine. We send each other pictures of stuff we find fascinating, infuriating or just plain funny. Works of art; images of Matt at work; a painting by Paul Cadmus; a sliced bagel; leaves on a street; a sign that reads "STAY CLOSE TO PEOPLE WHO FEEL LIKE SUNSHINE". It's a stream of Signification; a river of truth. Our truth. Yet we've never met.

We're an odd couple, us two Matts. We communicate in quick textual snippets and visual paraphrases that comfortably provide enough substance for us to feel we have some shared texture and perspective on that great big monster we all call life. We exchange with abbreviations; acronyms; glyphs; details. And it is that feeling of knowing yet not knowing someone (and knowing you don't know them but still consciously feeling like you do all the same) that runs true also of my appreciation of Matt's practice.

In this most recent exhibition of his at Wilson Stephens & Jones in London, Matt continues to create work, in a variety of media, that privileges the palpable physicality of making marks (and thus objects) over the conceptual trajectories that lie underneath (yet clearly inform) his process. His is an art that thinks whilst getting its hands dirty. This new body of work continues to explore Matt's fascination with the taxonomy of marks – and his efforts to classify them. Matt's marks evince not just the mark in and of itself (that's the art for art's sake bit) but, in his arduous, consistent and somewhat laborious application, the mark becomes an Index or a Sign of something else; something known yet unknown. Its repetition asserting and affirming Matt's existential 'me-ness' but also elevating his ritualistic process to that of the meditator's mantra. Each of Matt's curious yet delicious little abstractions chant one Om after another; each a single pebble that makes up a whole beach of abstraction.

To me, Matt is a bit of an aesthetic archaeologist. He digs up old artifacts of abstraction and then re-examines them in an often more playful, lyrical manner. His is not the cold, air-conditioned light of the analyst, but rather we explore, with the artist, various dialects of abstraction seen through an entirely affectionate lens. Not those rose-tinted ones that makes shit art palatable. But glasses that adumbrate past praxises and practitioners, whilst

still making room for Matt himself who, as an artist, clearly, both feeds off and is placed within a lineage and trajectory of twentieth-century American abstraction.

So, you see, this is where I feel I know Matt, even though I don't. His stunning collage "Blue Tear" (2002) feels like an ode to the wonderful Richard Tuttle. The gorgeous, sunny "Ingot" (2014) or dramatic "Nineteen Blue" (2013) – both totems of simplicity and saturation – speak of the oxymoronic density yet delicacy of Ellsworth Kelly's creative vision. And, of course, "Colour Totem" (2016) conveys aesthetic parallels with the great Robert Rauschenberg who, incidentally, Matt worked for many years ago as a photography archivist. Matt, like Bob before him, here makes a work of joyful, primitive modesty and candour. Something out of nothing. But which speaks volumes on an artist who would go to such lengths to fashion something so humble (and abjectly); would utilise such crappy materials as plastic bottle tops and then force them on to an old piece of found wood. This just certifies Matt's delight in the plurality of his means; the intellectual elasticity of his process and his sheer joy in the act of his art.

This exhibition revels in Matt's unashamed love for a geometry of colour. They declare Matt's freedom of thought as an artist even though he evidently collaborates with the patterns and paradigms of the past. They reveal a freshness and vigour born not of strategic concoction but of a playful, inventive tension, squeezing and tickling the austerity and gravity of Abstract Art's past in to looser, wittier forms. They also quietly dazzle with Matt's breezy, bluff take on those age-old binary antagonisms that speak of the very tenets of abstract painting over the past 100 years. His surfaces pulsate in that conversation between the organic and the artificial; between the found and the fashioned; between the street and the studio. And, of course, between the known and the unknown.

Which brings us back to the very beginning.

It was Donald Rumsfeld who famously quipped "... as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the one's we don't know we don't know." Abstraction – in all its various vernaculars and idioms – has been saying this for years. Hell, for centuries. Matt gets out his trowel and mines for this information, unearthing and observing it in this body of enchanting abstract work. In a sense, Matt 'Instagrammatizes' abstraction. Much like he has done in our relationship. Abstraction is compressed; summarized; abridged; hashtagged. And that action makes us feel like we really know that work and, of course, Matt's work. But we don't. He engages his viewer with a giant of a well-documented and debated subject, yet still pulls out dark Dumbledorean pensieves of mystery and majesty from it. And it's that which makes Matt Magee such an interesting, rewarding and, above all else, brave artist. He excavates the known to unearth the unknown; he interrogates quotidian familiarity in to crackerjack perplexity. The frog of simplicity is kissed in to the Prince of complexity. And that takes balls. Which, at the end of the day, is all an artist wants; it's all an artist needs.

I have never met Matt Magee. But, one day, I will.

Matt Carey-Williams is Senior Director of Sales for Victoria Miro Gallery, London. He also writes on contemporary art and artists and spends way too much time on Instagram.