

Toby Ziegler: Slave and Nao Matsunaga: Blue & White at New Art Centre, Salisbury

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Toby Ziegler, installation image. Image: © the artist, courtesy of New Art Centre, Roche Court Sculpture Park.

If you are reading this having feasted on the superabundance of Frieze week activities in London, then I am thinking of you when I suggest a trip to the country. Whether you take a cab from Grateley station, or tootle around the narrow green lanes by car, the experience of a visit to Roche Court is like no other. It is literally a breath of fresh air in looking at art. There is time, there is space, there is quiet.

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Two solo shows currently occupy the main spaces at the New Art Centre – a group of new sculptures and paintings by Toby Ziegler in the Gallery, and in the Artist's House, a group of works by the young Japanese artist Nao Matsunaga. While no claims are made for connections between the two, an acutely contemporary interrogation of their respective genres – sculpture, painting and ceramics – informs both bodies of work, and makes for an exceptionally satisfying visit.

Toby Ziegler is the more senior of the two artists – already represented in major public collections in this country and internationally, he also has a show on at the Freud Museum in London right now. Since the early 2000s his work has explored painting and sculpture in parallel, but both via ever-evolving relationships to the digital. To begin with, there were paintings on the reflective fabric used for high-vis jackets, with landscapes hand painted from schemes developed in 3D computer models. His sculptures – first in cardboard, then plywood and eventually aluminium polygonal shapes – appropriated classical and Hellenic models.

In recent years, Ziegler has appropriated well-known old master paintings as the basis for works on aluminium panel. Picking reproductions of paintings by Bruegel the Elder and Gainsborough from online sources, Ziegler pushes them through digital distortions to change their tonality, finally veiling the image in obscuring patterns of sprayed white blobs. It requires painstaking months to complete the underlying image, an investment in time, technique and skills. Then, in a characteristic act of risk-taking, Ziegler will sabotage the work: "retaliate against it" by attacking it with an electrical sander that cuts through to the brilliant white metal support. The effect is to isolate the de-natured image between the glimmering aluminium support and the veils of sprayed paint that overlay it. The original is effectively de-coupled from its own history and origins, free-floating in a kind of collective consciousness.

The current show has looked to Matisse for source material, both for paintings and sculpture. In the paintings, the reclining *odalisque* appears in Warhol-esque repeating pattern – or perhaps more accurately, the grid-form of a Google image search. Stripped of the master's sensuous palette, the images reveal the degree of their abstraction. The mark-making that overlays them is Ziegler emphasising the notion of disruption, not his own expression. There is some commonality of thinking here with the painter Glenn Brown, who also operates in an *absolutely* modern way, using digital media to process his own relationship to the history of painting.

Ziegler's sculptures here follow a similar intellectual path, and are like nothing you have ever seen before. The standing figure inside the gallery is based on Matisse's *Madeleine I*, 1902 – which itself owed much to Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*, 1513 in the articulation of the body through extreme *contraposto*. Ziegler has modelled the figure by hand in clay, and then using 3D scanning technology, scaled up and finally cast it in aluminium. Translated into matt, white metal, the piled coils of clay he used to make the original form have a softly draping quality that triggers thoughts of some kind of textile, perhaps. Here and there the regular coiling is interrupted by a soft slump, a depression, or in the case of the reclining figure in the garden, one strand of material being pulled away from the body. The effect is engrossing, the human form is compelling, as always for our pattern-seeking brains, but in this presentation it is also profoundly alien.

In the Artist's House, Nao Matsunaga presents a dense installation of his new work. Born in Osaka but educated in the UK, Matsunaga most recently did an MA in Ceramic and Glass at the RCA, graduating in 2007. Also significant is the fact that between his BA at Brighton and his MA at the RCA Matsunaga spent two years working in a traditional architectural ceramics company – I mention this, though it is a decade ago, because it is important in addressing his formal and intellectual engagement with ceramics as a medium and a discipline. This is distinct from artists such as Jessie Wine and Aaron Angel, who approached ceramics from a fine art background. Matsunaga brings to his work an understanding of the medium as a part of our built environment as well as the history of studio pottery. Matsunaga's works can be witty: pieces such as *(He is just) A Baby* and *Koma-Inu*, both 2017, have an anthropomorphism that makes you smile. They can also demonstrate a muscular sculptural ambition, such as the towering slab-construction *Blue Moon Ladder*, 2017. Matsunaga demonstrates his technical virtuosity in smaller works such as *Sometime Fountain*, 2016. This pale, bi-pedal form is constructed from slabs carved from the unfired clay of a coiled pot. Setting up a tension between opposing positions of the ceramics world – vessels and tableware vs autonomous sculptural form – Matsunaga makes pots, and then uses them as if they were a raw material. Introducing a further element of chance, in this work the artist has made a blue 'mattress glaze', and laid it over the clay form, so that it falls in random fashion over the sculpture during firing. The resulting object has a tremendous vitality, a sensuous engagement with the materiality of the medium, as well as rehearsing a deep knowledge of recent theorising. This is work that is already highly accomplished, an artist we should all be tracking closely over the coming years.

Caroline Douglas

Director