

TimeOut

Rachel Howard: Repetition is Truth – Via Dolorosa review

Humanity is capable of abominable acts of violence and degradation. We ignore most of them – they happen somewhere else, to other people – but our capacity for atrocity was laid bare during the Iraq war when images emerged of the humiliating treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. One showed Ali Shallal al-Qaisi stood on a box, a hood pulled over his head, arms spread wide, with wires attached to his fingers and genitals. Brutal, degrading, vile. A painting of that horrifying act opens Rachel Howard's show at Newport Street Gallery. His cloak is rendered as dripping, stuttering lines of weeping green and black, his hood is a drooping mask of misery. It's a brilliant, violent little painting.

The rest of the works here are much bigger and translate al-Qaisi's story into an allegory for Christ's stations of the cross, a classic art historical trope. Howard does away with obvious symbolism, creating instead these huge, almost entirely monochromatic, sandy-coloured abstracts. They glisten; they look hard, permanent, like polished wood or marble. The only shape in any of them is the box from the photo of al-Qaisi's torture – a constant, repeating allusion to his suffering. A plinth, or the edge of a crucifix.

The paint seems to stutter like a misfiring printer, creating washes of blurry colour, a little nod to Gerhard Richter. There's also a barren solemnity and austerity that hints at Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Howard's sights aren't set on grand emotional gestures but on something more immediate, more tangible: real violence, real war, real suffering. The only real quibble is with the space itself – Howard's series deserves darkness, sombreness, not the cold harshness of a concrete gallery.

These are giant, imposing reminders of our capacity for violence and pain, of how easy it is for the curtain of morality to drop. This show is a simple, abstract church of human brutality, and we've got a lot of atoning to do.

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