



Maria Zahle
 'Trotzky and the
 Wild Orchids'
 installation view

The collages are improvisations, cut from piles of hand-coloured paper which the Danish artist spreads over her London studio floor. Each forms a pool of colour, typically a little too big for the equally bright grounds they are set on, and jostling up against their sleek aluminium tray frames. There is no glass in the frames, a cheap way of preventing reflections which also offsets the formality of the frames, so suiting the casual mode of their making. This may be improvisation, but it isn't chance: the hand leads, but years of the brain lie behind its movements. Henri Matisse is bound to hover over such cut-outs, but he is held at bay by Zahle's rather prominent use of tape across the edges of the topmost forms to stop them falling away. That introduces an air of awkward provisionality as well as, on closer inspection, a little joke: the tape is clearly insufficient for its purpose, typically just one strip to the side of the large paper shape to be kept in place. That would-be perfunctory effect is decidedly studied: the real holding up takes place from behind.

The non-functional tape finds an echo in the floor piece. That turns a potentially serviceable cardboard box into a fixed-flat plinth which holds cloth that is rendered unusable by an internal wire frame that freezes it into the shape of an irregular shelter. Zahle hand-weaves the flax, complementing how she hand-dyes her papers, and has sewn two items into the textile: a nipple-like pewter button and a somewhat ocular cluster of pyrite crystals. It becomes easy to see the work as representing the flattened cardboard bed and tent of blankets of a rough sleeper hinted at by those bodily suggestions. Perhaps the avoidance of political content is less clear-cut than Zahle's framing of the exhibition claims. This triggers the thought that the overspilling collages could point to rising sea levels. The whole show could be linked to the syndrome whereby the ruling elite ignores problems – such as global warming and homelessness – because tackling them seriously would disrupt too many vested interests. Should we, then, also be sceptical of Zahle's professed lack of concern with the possibilities of connection?

Perhaps, though that merely reflects a critical law of sorts: you can connect pretty much any two things if you put your mind to it. More convincingly, we are left with the joy of the hand-made, of simple forms, of humming colours. To return to Rorty, my speculations could indicate just how tempting it is to seek unity, how hard it can be to accept that the world may not be built like that. ■

Paul Carey-Kent is a writer and curator based in Southampton.

Fiona Crisp: Material Sight

Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art

Sunderland 24 March to 13 May

'Material Sight' makes it impossible to start a review anywhere else than with the soundtrack, which is intense, uncompromising and invasive, to the extent that it almost assumes physical form as you move around the gallery – a physical form lodged in your brain. This noise is both general and specific: unknown machines pounding and throbbing away, interspersed every now and again with the angry honk of a truck or the plaintive beeps of some unseen vehicle reversing. The Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art's new space is a hanger-like room, with a concrete floor and exposed pipes clad in silver foil snaking across the ceiling. This genteelly post-industrial aesthetic provides an apposite setting for Fiona Crisp's investigation into three different advanced research laboratories across Europe (although the effect is undone slightly by the fact that you have to enter the gallery incongruously, and a little depressingly, through the National Glass Centre cafe).

Once acclimatised to the sonic overload, the photographs and videos that make up 'Material Sight' unfold lucidly. Gradually, certain sounds can be matched to specific videos. Glowing giclée prints and monitors are displayed on a rectangular scaffold of aluminium poles, arranged so that they face alternately into the centre of this structure and outwards from it, with the result that the viewer can never quite grasp the full picture. This underscores the sense that, for most people, the activities pursued by the physics and cosmology institutes explored in 'Material Sight' will seem overwhelmingly obscure, even terrifyingly abstruse. Crisp gestures to this in *LNGS: Blackboard*, 2018, which shows a set of partially smudged and indecipherable chalk calculations made by scientists at the Laboratori Nazionali del Gran Sasso, a vast particle physics laboratory built into a mountain in Italy.

The majority of the imagery focuses on the spaces carved out to conduct scientific tests and their technological innards; Crisp also spent time at the UK's deepest working mine at Boulby Underground Laboratory in Cleveland, as well as at the Institute for Computational Cosmology and the Centre for Advanced Instrumentation, both at Durham University. One screen shows footage taken from the front of a vehicle as it ploughs through some endless subterranean tunnel, its headlamps raggedly illuminating an apocalyptic-looking terrain. Another focuses in

A MURMUR OF HISTORY
 30 April-10 June 2018
 Bath, Somerset

DE LEÓN

Mamma Andersson
 Dexter Dalwood
 Amie Siegel
 John Stezaker

Friday and Saturday 10am-5pm by appointment
 Please contact: bridget.delcon@icloud.com or 07957 438402
www.bridgetdelcon.com

Fiona Crisp
 'Material Sight'
 installation view



on small sections of indecipherable machinery, and a third rests on an empty passageway covered with wires and warning signs. Occasionally, we catch glimpses of people, but always rendered alien by boiler suits, hooded lab coats and helmets.

The fragmentation of the imagery in 'Material Sight', and its inability to convey clear information about, or understanding of, the processes portrayed, might be intended to inspire dismay and fear about the perceived 'inhumanity' of scientific progress and its attendant voracious despoliation. This view is indicated by the photograph *Joy3 Continuous Miner*, 2018, which reveals a machine roller covered in a greedy snarl of spikes, crouching in a darkened corner like something from a medieval bestiary. Simultaneously, 'Material Sight' is permeated by an aesthetics of the sublime, from the glacial explosion of crystalline matter in what might perhaps be a computer simulation of subatomic particles, to an extended shot from the Gran Sasso cable car as it takes employees back down to earth from the mountaintop, which gradually discloses an omniscient bird's-eye view of majestic scenery. These perspectives, although they might initially seem very different, are closely connected, as awe-inspired wonder bleeds into distinct unease.

This sublimity, however, sits at odds with the title of Crisp's installation, which ostensibly offers a far more materialist perspective on the scientific experiments observed. Yet her studies of scientists and technicians tending to their sleek machines are very different from, say, Allan Sekula's photographs of workers inside the bowels of ships in *Fish Story*, 1989-95, and that project's class-based economic analysis of globalisation via the study of shipping trajectories and cargos. The pamphlet accompanying the exhibition stresses that Crisp's work is not documentary, which raises questions as to what exactly it is, and how, if not through documentary traditions, art can engage with the processes of production at a level beyond representation. Upstairs in the National Glass Centre, displays track the confluence of coal, shipping and sand that led to the boom in glass manufacturing along the River Wear. What Crisp does capture is the extent to which the scientific means of production have shifted away from the industrial scenario and are becoming ever more abstracted, while probing the extent to which visual media might – or might not – be able to endow them with tangibility. ■

Catherine Spencer is a lecturer at the University of St Andrews.

Is This Planet Earth?

Tŷ Pawb Wrexham 2 April to 24 June

In the market town of Wrexham, North Wales, Tŷ Pawb – which loosely translates as 'Everybody's House' – is bucking the trend of gallery closures and funding cuts, and doing it well. Oriol Wrexham has metamorphosed – via a £4.5m redevelopment of the old town centre market hall funded by the Welsh Arts Council and Wrexham Council – into this new mixed-use venue, which will be largely financially self-sufficient. Set below a multi-storey car park, revenue will be generated by car park users, but also from the leases of the 20 or so market units and a handful of office spaces.

Tŷ Pawb hopes that this inherently multi-use model will spur real integration between contemporary art audiences and the market's original users. To this end, large tri-vision rotating mechanical billboards have been installed on its main indoor market square featuring the work of commissioned artists. Katie Cuddon kicks off the project with six vividly coloured renditions of simplified forms: eyes, arms and laughing mouths appear to caper jollily across the regularly revolving billboards.

The galleries themselves include two substantial rooms and a performance space. Unintentionally, I come at things backwards, drawn in by the bustle of informal community activities in Gallery 2. Here, families are drawing at a long trestle table and brightly coloured scraps of plastic – arranged, ordered or just kicked about by enthusiastic toddlers – encroach across the floor. This found detritus also appears in photographs by Tim Pugh, Tŷ Pawb's current artist in residence, which line the walls. Meanwhile, pop music jingles irreverently overhead; I'm not unhappily bewildered.

In the *melée*, a chunky box television is set on the floor. It features found illustrations of flora, fauna and landscapes, rendered surreal in their animation by Salvatore Arancio, a kind of low-fi magic realism on acid. Over hills, through underground tunnels and caves, it culminates in a world saturated with artificial bubble-gum pink and is one part of the sci-fi inflected group exhibition in Gallery 1 in which possible futures of life on Earth are variously imagined.

'Is This Planet Earth?' – guest curated by Angela Kingston – opens with eight sizeable paintings by Dan Hayes depicting knowingly hackneyed tropes: moonshine set above the treetops, sun glimpsed through branches, and sweet watery reflections.

Copyright of Art Monthly is the property of Art Monthly and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.