True Fun and Dark Games (The Artist will Not be Present)

La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose.  
(Poetry no longer imposes; it exposes itself.) — Paul Celan [1969]

A graphite scrawled date is part of the picture: enough to remind us of the absence of the artist. Like the scratched ‘X was here’: indicative of a momentary presence, past, poignant and pathetic. Not too precise, no day or month, just the year. Enough said.

For the rest, crayon and paint scribbles, paint dribbles, indeterminate marks, arbitrary lines, random instances of papier collé on canvas—newspaper scraps, hand-coloured paper hand-marked with dots, dashes, stripes, torn manila fragments—all done with insouciant quickness, immediacy of decision, touch and placement. It could not be otherwise: it is crucial to Illsley’s purposes (long considered, always spontaneous) that the means to expression be provisional, unpremeditated. How else to be authentic without being authorial, authoritative, imposing, definite, definitive? With these recent works we are confronted, as ever with Illsley, by the paradoxical expositions of a deliberately determined spontaneity.

If a sentence has no end (as, for example, in the poetics of the later work of Paul Celan) it is because it cannot find its end, its true end (so to speak) being not to have an end. Syntactical structures are the governance of an inner order that finds expression in objective actualities of shared speech: writing, which is a version of drawing, is a type of speech. Utterance comes, material, from the body (which comprehends the mind). Ah! — here we have analogies: colour and tone, matter and medium, gestural action of body, arm and wrist (disegno: the common source) on the support. These are the givens. ‘Given’: as, perhaps, an inheritance, a blessing, a set of shared deep structures, a natural impulse to order. But what if what is given, as with speech, proves inadequate to certain realities, certain experiences beyond the word and its familiar orders?

Illsley’s beautiful paintings attend (rather, they invite us to attend) to that kind of reality, they invite that kind of experience. (The adjective, beautiful, is his as well as mine, innocently unabashed in the face of what has been made, he knows not how, having removed himself from the circumstance.) They are not vague but exact; they are not expressive but objective: image and object are one. They are composed of signs not images, signs that cohere into an image whose meaning is invariably reflexive but not ironic. Their titles are often facetiously comic or deadpan banal: injunctions against solemnity, for the life and death, the chaos, the wordless despair to which they may seem to allude, are things far too serious to warrant a long face.

Knowing their absurdity (L. ‘out of tune-ness’; ‘senselessness’) from inside, he abjures certainties, is against interpretation. He knows of course the cunning of his craft, the moves and feints: he is ever an artful dodger. If I descry the tracks of tears, the smudge of bleared vision, the torn edge, the vehemence of stroke and gesture, the uncertainty of a gesticulation in no particular direction, those glimpses are mine, and I start at the surface to work my way in. I see also gaiety, in dots, dashes, stripes, colours, the insouciance of chance gestures and the exactitudes of a lovely unpredictability of graphic line: paradoxes of utterance, dialectics of comedy and despair. It is not a matter of expression. ‘I remember telling you once’ wrote Celan to a friend, ‘that once the poem is really there, the poet is dismissed, is no longer privy.’

Painting that aspires — as Illsley’s does — to expose itself, its designs to have no designs, its intention to have no intent, must delight in making no sense but that which is sensed, intuitive, un-attributable, incomplete, an absence. It may not even be painting, as we understand it. Whatever it is, it is necessary. To borrow once more from Celan, it must resort to a language ‘that tries to be truthful… more factual … which wants to locate even its “musicality” in such a way that it has nothing in common with the “euphony” which more or less blithely [continues] to sound alongside the greatest horrors.’ Is there a braver artist than Illsley? Perhaps some as brave; none braver.

Mel Gooding June 2014