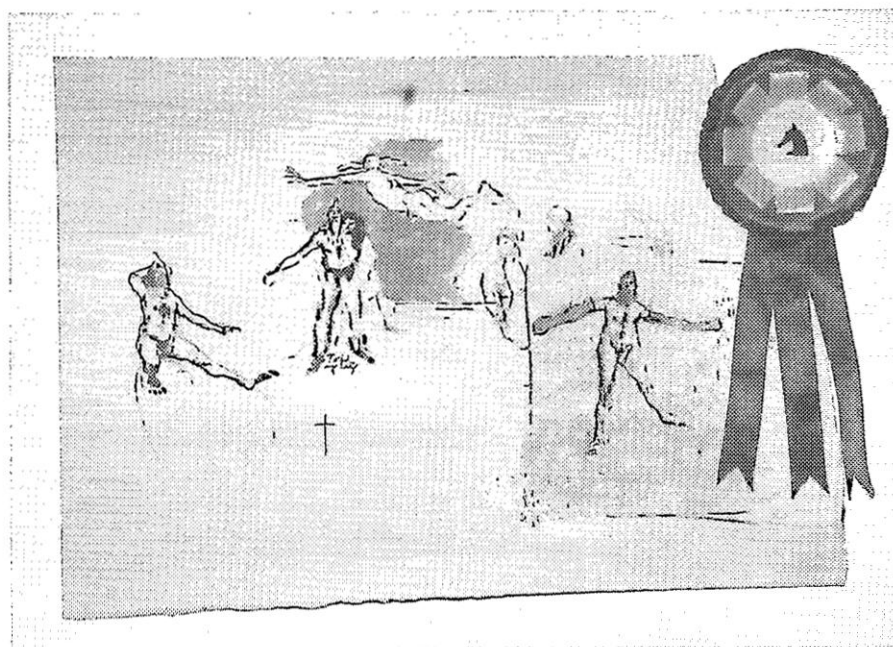


Simon English
Real Rosette 2002-04
 detail



and full of junk, but strangely compelling. Thomas Grünfeld presents a very different sculptural work, this time exploring themes of genetics and a fear of technology in *Misfit Vitrine III*, 1989-90, his sculpture of a taxidermied rabbit and bird combined, complete with long fangs. And kitschness returns in a huge wooden sculpture by Brian Griffiths, *The Decadence of Losing*, 2003, which consists of a man created out of cheap wooden objects. Collage also appears, perhaps slightly less successfully, in various video pieces, including works by Jeff Keen and Judith Goddard that present hypnotic layers of imagery within their films.

'Collage' is overall an interesting show, stuffed full of intriguing works by both significant and new artists. Yet it suffers from a lack of curatorial direction – the viewer is left to explore and connect the works alone, without guidance visually or factually from the gallery, which could have brought the art further to life. The older works here suffer particularly as a result, and in some ways it is difficult to see why they have been included, as they leave you pining to see the artists' more significant works rather than the obscurer pieces on offer here. Another minor complaint is the lack of description of the materials used by each artist as in this show, more than most, it proves a particular frustration and again a hindrance to getting a closer understanding of the works. These grumbles aside though, the exhibition contains some arresting and inspiring works, and as long as it is visited with a keen eye, treasures will be discovered. ■

ELIZA WILLIAMS is a freelance writer and editor living in London.

■ Simon English

Rhodes + Mann London March 29 to May 9

On January 2, 1911, Wassily Kandinsky attended a concert of Arnold Schoenberg's music in Munich. After the performance, which included the *Second String Quartet*, Op 10, 1908, and *Three Piano Pieces*, Op 11, 1909 – the two works in which Schoenberg first clearly broke with tonality – Kandinsky sent a letter to the composer praising his 'anti-geometrical, anti-logical' music. Schoenberg replied: 'I am sure that our work has much in common and indeed in the most important respects: in what you call the "unlogical" and I call the "elimination of the conscious in art" ... But art belongs to the unconscious! One must express oneself! Express oneself directly! Not one's taste, or one's upbringing, or one's intelligence, knowledge or skill. Not all these *acquired* characteristics, but that which is *inborn, instinctive*.'

Looking at Simon English's new works at Rhodes + Mann, words like 'direct self-expression', 'instinct' or the 'unconscious' come to mind. Twelve panels hang from the walls of the three gallery rooms. Each of them is composed by 8, 10 or 15 sheets of paper of around 48 centimetres high by 66 wide, organised in (two or three) columns of four or five. English has painted, drawn, written and stuck things onto the pieces of paper, seemingly without order or structure. Characters and themes appear recurrently, and combine with each other dynamically, sometimes overwhelmingly so. Images of nurses, horses, men involved in different sexual activities and big bunnies are mixed with references to literature (LP Hartley, D'Artagnan, *Pride and Prejudice*, DH Lawrence); popular culture (Julie Christie,

Prejudice, DH Lawrence); popular culture (Julie Christie, Beckham, the Queen's dressmaker Norman Hartnell, Leeds United), and art (El Greco, Martin Honert, Degas, Henry Moore or Ellsworth Kelly). Furthermore, sentences written in a work reappear elsewhere: 'I was four when my father was shot' (from *Haddock*, 2003) or 'I was three when my father was shot' (in *Ansuya Blum*, 2002-04); 'The troops loved him' (both in *Jean Plaidy*, 2002-04, and *Farmer Humpty*, 2002-04); or 'The farmer wants a wife', in *Farmer Humpty* and *Mrs Brown*, 2003-04.

Two subjects recur throughout the works: sex and an artist's insecurities. The former, which English depicts in his casual but extremely crafted drawings, is reflected in unconventional practices – fisting, male group sex, bondage – with a mixture of crudeness and naivety. The latter appear in the form of comments on the drawings ('Mistake', 'Very well painted') or sentences that are self-deprecatory ('I don't know how to paint', 'Your [sic] useless give up') or playful and optimistic ('If I was a sculptor, de diddle diddle diddle dee, I would want to be Robert Gober, de diddle diddle diddle dee').

With this material – which, according to the dates of the works has occupied English for the last two years – the temptation to elaborate a psychological or psychoanalytical reading is strong. The artistic expression of what Schoenberg called 'unconscious, inborn, instinctive' lends itself to be analysed in terms of a narrative that articulates the unconscious or pre-conscious frustrations and aspirations of the artist. In that sense, much could be written about the work in relation to the artist's personal life, and, adopting a wider approach, about the general environment in which that work was created.

If the interest of psychoanalytical reading in art is generally limited, in Simon English's case it would certainly miss the point, and lead one to ignore what makes it relevant – and extremely appealing. Despite appearances to the contrary, the combination, superimposition, captioning, correcting and blurring are not there to be read as a personal confession. Sentences like 'The first big lie' or 'My second big lie' already advise against it. They are just not supposed to be read. Any attempt to construct a narrative would betray the accumulation of images and words, by turning them from incoherent collages into small stories. The fact that the drawings have been assembled in a certain order, titled, framed and covered with glass doesn't help here, as it strengthens an already generalised tendency – in art, but also in culture and life – to treat things like data that demands reading.

The drawings, despite the framing, are not finished objects. They are the result of an artist's decision to make work without allowing himself the possibility of self-censorship. And, if there was any correction to be made, it is now there to be seen. This honesty, a consequence of a refusal to select 'good' from 'bad' production, results in accumulations of images, both visual and linguistic, that draw the viewer into the detail, and completely – but gently – absorb him. It is then, when narrative is forgotten, that English's images really come to life. ■

PABLO LAFUENTE is a writer and senior editor at *ArtReview*.

■ Raoul De Keyser

Whitechapel Art Gallery London

March 30 to May 23

Although Raoul De Keyser has become something of a cult among painters over the last 15 years or so, this exhibition, presenting a survey of his work of the last 40 years is only his third showing in London and is his first major exhibition here (since his contribution to 'Unbound – Possibilities in Painting' at the Hayward Gallery ten years ago and a small exhibition at White Cube two years ago). The Whitechapel's exhibition has positioned him alongside artists such as Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter and Frank Stella, thereby elevating his status. One can't help but sense that if critics and curators are once again reasserting that painting is returning from the dead it is to the painting of De Keyser that a chart of this new life can be located. (The Whitechapel's peculiarly ill-conceived 'Edge of the Real – A Painting Show' occupying one third of the upper galleries seems to suggest that some such strategy is being considered.)

The first impressions from the exhibition revolve around the language that De Keyser has chosen to explore as a painter. The lower gallery, which effectively takes us up to what has been acknowledged to be his breakthrough in the 80s almost has the character of a group show. It is not so much that there are many different voices here, although occasionally elements of other artists' work appear to break surface, but the very twists and turns between each painting reveal more about De Keyser as a painter than they do about his particular sources. What the variability of his painting emphatically reveals is a way of working in which he could be said to be approaching each painting almost as if it is always the first one. Looking at the three paintings selected from the 'Sails Hills' series of 1979, or the three paintings from the 'Tornado' series of 1981 is to look at two groups of paintings that seem to have nothing to do with each other: different motifs and compositions, different weights and directions of brushstrokes, different colours, different canvas sizes. (Although the three 'Soft Monkey Puzzle' paintings of 1982 serve to refute this observation.) All this suggests that De Keyser is making paintings and not paintings that have to be identifiably of something else.

If, however, De Keyser is approaching painting in this way, what is his subject and what is he hoping to communicate when on the face of it the process of decoding seems so difficult? One indication is perhaps provided by the differences between his earlier painting from the 60s and early 70s, and his work from the 80s and 90s. Despite the shift from a painterly, brushy mark-making to a graphic, cleaner form of representation, *Untitled*, 1964-66, *Slice III*, 1969, and *Ground*, 1971/95, all depict space schematically, essentially as fragments, while at the same time emphasising the act of representation as a form of objectification in which materiality and manufacture are pushed to the foreground. These are all recognisably landscapes, whether of the countryside or the