

Forensic

The paintings in this room are notable for their extreme close up. Our gaze mirrors their own stare; fixing them compellingly before us. Framed and captured for our devouring eyes, this body of work is among the most uncomfortable of Stichbury's oeuvre—so numb and flattened they might be embalmed.

Glister has eyes so wide she gives the appearance of a possum caught in the headlights, or, more appropriately, a starlet caught in the Paparazzi's lens. Each individual eye lash is blown up to gigantic proportions, while her teeth emerge from between slightly moistened lips. She embodies every stereotype of sexual promise, but has been enhanced and enlarged to such a degree that she unsettles rather than allures.

But if *Glister* has a somewhat alien appearance, *Languor* is the ultimate construct. *Languor* is a painting of Fi-Fi, the girl who sold us Playstation 2 in a 1999 advertisement by video artist Chris Cunningham. Fi-Fi was played by an actor called Fiona MacLean, but post-production transformed MacLean from a pretty girl into a strange distorted creature whose eyes have been turned inwards and pulled apart, her mouth squashed and her body stretched. Fi-Fi has moved beyond the normal boundaries of the body to become a cyber being, but her capture in the painting brings her one further step towards unreality. As Fi-Fi says in the ad: "Land on your own moon".

Heart Felt

While other paintings in *The Alumni* may declare that surface *is* content, these paintings form the emotional core of the exhibition. What characterises each of the works is a heightened sense of vulnerability. This is expressed in physical manifestations, such as Joe Gruver's bruised eye and Herman Brittle's plaster. Other works suggest a more internal pain or defencelessness.

So it is not surprising that the largest painting in the exhibition *Walter Whitlow*, catches a fresh faced doe eyed twenty-something zoning out into the psychological abyss. There is the distinct sense with this painting that the sitter has just received bad news or is recalling an unpleasant episode in their life – whatever it is Walter is on the verge of an emotional plunge. In contrast, the character of *Eddie Vaughn* might appear belligerent. The image is, after all, taken from the police mug shot of an anonymous American criminal. However such extraordinary toughness might imply it is covering an inner fear. *Eddie Vaughn's* overly large forehead is covered in a series of tiny cuts and scratches, which Stichbury has described as “a metaphor for internal conflict. I wanted the painting to feel institutional but non-threatening, even compassionate”.

The Orpheum

The title of this section—*The Orpheum*—refers to a historically popular name for theatres, in homage to Orpheus, the Greek god whose music could move mountains and still running streams. *The Orpheum* harks back to the halcyon days of live entertainment before television and the internet, when vaudeville and music halls played to full houses.

At times, Peter Stichbury's painted characters have leapt off the canvas into a sculptural dimension, suggesting the fakery and tricks of a theatrical setting. In doing so, Stichbury has taken the idea of the artist as a modern day Frankenstein—who creates human persona from illusion or magic—and taken it to its disturbing conclusion.

A series of works use wooden bowls, lifted from the historic and genteel game of lawn bowls. Stichbury has painted faces directly onto balls found in second hand shops and through trade me. Entire communities of characters are represented in the bowls; from beautiful ingénues to the well known TV personality Sister Wendy Beckett and one half of the internet successful story of Google. But the characters are disembodied and placed on shelves, creating the sense of mummified remains.

Valentine Vox is the replica of a ventriloquist's dummy handmade by the artist. Stichbury has based *Valentine Vox* on photos of dummies from the early part of last century, when ventriloquism was a popular form of entertainment. Ventriloquism is the art of throwing one's voice so it appears to come from an inanimate object, and was originally associated with the idea of summoning spirits from beyond the grave. Rehabilitated into vaudeville performance, ventriloquism continues to carry with it an uneasy connection to the dark arts.

The Revenge of the Nerds

If one views High School as the ultimate social competition, with its rigid hierarchies and stringent rules for success, then the losers must surely be geeks. Mathletes, nerds, dorks, dweebs: the names might fluctuate but the low peer status remains the same. Socially awkward but intellectually formidable, the stock features of the nerd stereotype include uncoordinated clothing, pocket protectors, lack of personal hygiene, too short ('high-water') pants, and glasses, especially with ad hoc repairs.

The painting *Chester Karnofsky* depicts an adolescent boy in his gawky prime all hunched shoulders and apologetic persona. Chester is accompanied by an additional painting titled *Love Missile F1-11 (Joy Stick)* depicting the computer control described in the title. This inanimate object speaks volumes. *Joy Stick* might be a reference to technology, but it is also a symbol of sexuality and control.

The other half of the title is the title of a song by 80s band Sigue Sigue Sputnik, which appears in the soundtrack to the 80s film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, in which a young Mathew Broderick plays truant from school and a cheeky game of cat and mouse with an irate teacher.

Unlike the character of Ferris Bueller, this posse of geeks from Chritchley to Vernon and Chester appear unsure, poised awaiting something —acceptance into the cool group at school, university or adulthood perhaps. They might be ready to blossom, yet, we suspect, they are a little fearful of what hurdles life may throw at them.

The Standard Model

The images which form probably the most well known of Peter Stichbury's work—his blondes—are blessed in their genetic make up. These paintings of young blonde women represent the ultimate dream girl. The most flawless of models—glossy, doe-eyed, air brushed, they represent the standard the rest of us can only deviate from.

With *Liberty and Chastity* their names read like interchangeable couture brands. Like beautiful shells, glossy and highly polished of surface, beneath the immaculate facades of these portraits lurk a darker underbelly. Their flawlessness suggests the application of socially endorsed transformations. We live, after all, in a world where cosmetic surgery is given as 19th birthday presents and Botox is administered in party settings. The human body in its natural state is merely a canvas, awaiting manipulation.

The more recent painting *Heather Traymont* depicts a beautiful blonde young woman who is perfect in every aspect except one—her ear. Over-sized and a wrong shade of pink, it's an imperfection which demonstrates the pure delicacy of the rest of her face and is simultaneously a corruption which cuts to the core of that beauty.

The single male in this line-up is *Sloane*, a handsome man with a chiseled jaw and perfect, pouting lips. The title *Sloane* suggests the slang term 'Sloane Ranger', a British term for fashionable upper class men and women. This slang originates from the amalgamation of 'Sloane Square' in London with the television cowboy character 'The Lone Ranger'. Sloane Rangers are renowned for a frivolous, extravagant lifestyle, but one which is rooted in patriotism and traditionalism. The high point of Sloane Ranger fashion was the 1980s and the most famous Sloane Princess Diana. Used today, the term remains an indicator of a level of social aspiration.

The Young and the Restless

Models, movie stars, celebrities; the characters here are obsessed with their own narcissism and beauty. Dressed in haute couture and adopting the dandy's stance of indolent superiority, their realm is one of hedonism and excess.

The paintings *Swoon (Stendhal Syndrome)* and *Mary Lou* provide us with the most extreme version of Stieglitz's vanities: rich, beautiful and so replete with life's pleasures they are bored. Posing nonchalantly, their creased foreheads represent some kind of intense or perplexing thought. Yet, simultaneously, they are perfectly composed and packaged to be consumed.

Titles are never a last minute flourish to Stieglitz's work but rather form an integral relationship with the content of the image itself. The myriad of puns and references in the titles of his works are more than in-jokes for those in the know, they operate as secret code which, when deciphered by the patient viewer, tease out the concerns of the work.

The title of *Swoon (Stendhal Syndrome)* rewards careful investigation. 'Stendhal Syndrome' is in fact a psychosomatic illness which causes rapid heartbeat, dizziness, confusion, and even hallucination when an individual is exposed to art. The condition was first described and named in 1979 by Italian psychiatrist Graziella Magherini, to describe the reaction of tourists overwhelmed when viewing the splendors of Florentine art, after the 19th Century author Stendhal who wrote about experiencing an overpowering sense of emotion after visiting the Cathedral Santa Croce in 1817.

The cult of celebrity, and our obsession with it, is stamped across Stieglitz's paintings. In recent times Hollywood has come to the Antipodes, a fact acknowledged in *Nestle Bettencourt* and *Anna Paquin*. *Nestle Bettencourt* is a painting of the Australian singer and actor Natalie Imbruglia, while *Anna Paquin* is, of course, our very own Academy Award winner. Both Paquin and Imbruglia represent the local girl made good. Despite their successes, they each exude innocence in their persona, apparently untouched by the workings of the celebrity machine.