

'Saudade': 16 November – 3 December 2006

If one thing could be said to unify the thinking of postmodern philosophers over last 30 odd years, it is perhaps the sustained attack on the notion that language can paint a realistic picture of our world. As Paul de Man wrote in *Allegories of Reading*, “We write in order to forget our foreknowledge of the total opacity of words” and when we start translating between one language and another the task of defining what individual words and phrases mean becomes even more slippery. A prime example of this is the Portuguese word 'saudade', which lacks anything even remotely close to an English equivalent. The nearest approximation is perhaps 'nostalgia', but this is normally the memory of a joyful past tinged with sadness for its impossible return. With saudade, there remains a forlorn hope that what has been lost might ultimately reappear, even if that eventuality is so unlikely as to be of almost no consequence in practical terms.

The paintings, sculptures, drawings, installations, videos and performances of the 16 artists in this exhibition all touch upon one of the many ways that saudade could be defined. Often this involves the play between truth and fantasy: the paintings of Ryan Mosley, for example, hint at snippets of memory hazily conjured up from an indeterminate past, and Sarah Dwyer's images blend the real, the half-remembered and the invented in scenes that evoke a sense of dreamlike reverie. The performances of Amanda Couch, on the other hand, recreate the prim theatrics of an Edwardian tea party, in which the past is presented as both near at hand and surreally distant, while Claudia Sarnthein's drawings show biomorphic organism that we know are inventions, but they have been given just enough life to still appear palpably believable.

In Brazil, saudade is often associated with a physical dislocation from one's family and friends (a function of the vastness of the country) and this sensation can be found in Raymond Taudin-Chabot's photographs, in which lost, snow-blind stragglers wander confusedly around a blanched landscape. There is a similar air of alienation in Laura Green's paintings, but this time it is prosaic objects rather than people that have been unceremoniously wrenched from their environment.

It is no coincidence that while philosophy continues to undermine language's claim to fidelity, art has simultaneously become more and more interested in the workings of linguistics. In fact, as Craig Owens famously argued in *Beyond Recognition*, it could be said that the merging of the visual arts and language over recent years is what defines postmodernism itself. This has resulted in a dual liberation for the artist: firstly, the deconstruction of language has become another aesthetic theme to use as he or she sees fit and, secondly, art is now widely viewed as conveying just as much truth as literature. If we were going to build a working definition for saudade, it would have to encompass several elements: a longing for a person, object or event that has gone, but might return in the future; a yearning for something that may not, or perhaps cannot, exist; a turning away from the present towards the past or the future; and an unfocussed wistfulness mixed with melancholia. An alternative, and perhaps more effective, definition is offered by simply viewing the artwork in this exhibition.

Pryle Behrman, November 2006