



Damien Meade

2 March – 27 April 2018

Thursday to Saturday 12–6 pm and by appointment

Opening reception

Friday 2 March, 6–9pm

Damien Meade's paintings begin as mud, but live on as creatures of dirt. Minerals suspended in water are made compact—first by time, then the artist's hand—and transform into something that Meade cannot, or at least does not want to name. Paint shifts onto linen panels like dried-up play doh curling at its edges, creating what looks like hair, pairs of lips or the surface of skin, perhaps. In an unusual twist of tradition, this clay will never see the inside of a furnace. Instead, it stays wet and, once he is through, will be crushed and churned into the shape of Meade's next model. These faces are consumed by an assumed role—as though, each portrait is actually an actor's headshot auditioning for a play called 'High Art'—so much so, that they have become indifferent to the eye that is beholding them. Mark, though, there is nothing theatrical about mud—it sits, covers up, and cooks while basking in the sun. There is a push and pull, a child's gentle yet commanding tug, at the artificiality of this performance being in opposition to but also dependent on the most natural medium imaginable: mud.

Muddy substances are domesticated in England only insofar as some people will in their viscous depths find treasure to drag home with them. Unlike ceramic spoons or bowls, Meade's paintings are uncooked and you wouldn't want nor expect to be cooking with them. His painted depictions of sinuous clay remind us of conventions in art and how they relate to the human body: you can look but please don't touch. More than this, clay and oil are irrigated from earth and the texture of Meade's work is telling of its composite parts—not usually seen indoors, let alone someone's house. This is nature in a threatening guise as there is a lurky danger that these things

might spill over, make mess, and ruin cleanliness. Kept in a premature phase, these paintings of sculptures discuss ugliness as the writer Mark Cousins has tried to define it, by bringing the imperfect or the slightly confused to the fore. Like dirt, Meade's sculptures are acceptable when kept at a distance; different from Walter de Maria's earthiness, for example, because the paint holds its dirt under a layer of oil and refuses to release it into the atmosphere.

In a periodical study of London and its inhabitants, the Victorian journalist William Mayhew wrote about 'Mudlarks': people, often children, known for walking along the Thames searching for desirable objects lost at sea and hidden in the marshy ground. Mudlarks were antisocial figures who wore 'tattered indescribable things', rarely speaking as they sifted through the stinking beach. Similar to Meade's rude friends, they were inattentive to the eyes that watched them. The mudlark kept his or her gaze to the floor and, because of a preoccupation with finding something, was known as a mysterious scavenger. That's not to say that they were unobtrusive people. Mayhew wrote an extended narrative on the mudlark including one interview with 'an Irish Lad of about thirteen years old', as though a description of the typical everyday routine of a mudlark could provide some insight into this soggy lifestyle. Obsessed with looking down, the young mudlark is industrious on a temporary concourse and will be periodically interrupted by the coming and going of tides, boats and drunken parents. Though not strictly outlawed, mudlarks were 'generally good swimmers', prepared to flee at any moment and on the literal edge of society: the shoreline. An unsightly lot, these loiterers were apparently 'covered in vermin' and barred from public houses and coffee shops. The mudlark dismissed the city by rejecting the eyes that were, as Mayhew's writing affirms, watching on with curiosity. Leaving footprints as payment, the mudlark would uncover odd but valuable things including iron fragments, bits of rope and smoking pipes: a type of mining but for mislaid, forgotten things. We can imagine a mudlark walking across one of Meade's linen panels: an ornate stain, a footprint, mud in the shape of a school matron's bust.

Instead of searching for something material, Meade's portraits explore what it is to falsify or attain stature through art. A painting by Damien Meade brings out the baseness of a much-thumbed piece of clay, producing the outline of a hand that gestures towards a body that is invariably jettisoned. Each one is made of dirt, matter out of place, and is dirty because of its visual fallibility rather than any substantial qualities. Weight compresses, moves and bends things—originally, soil—out of shape. Both a tablet and a footprint, the horizontal steps into the vertical apparition of a portrait. His paintings of clay portray a cuneiform script—asking to be read—about contact, mark-making, things congealing or being fired but also, crudeness.

The recycled material is a reminder of decomposition, a different type of shape shifting, beginnings and ends.

Fitting, then, to see these paintings in Deptford, a deep ford, where the banks of the river swallow up and moan against human feet and their activity.

The shore, like any passage, is both entrance and exit wing.

Damien Meade (b. 1969, Ireland) lives and works in London. He obtained his MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Art in London.

Notable recent group shows include 'Nature Morte', Guildhall Art Gallery, London (2017); 'Black Light', Averard Hotel, London (2016); 'The London Open', Whitechapel Gallery, London (2015); 'Suspicion', Jerwood Space, London (2014); 'Shape Shifters', ACME Los Angeles (2013); 'The John Moores Painting Prize', Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (2012); 'SV12', Studio Voltaire, London (2012). Solo and two-person shows include Damien Meade at Peter von Kant, London (2018); 'Damien Meade & Natasza Niedziolka', Sommer & Kohl, Berlin (2015); 'Insomniac', Singular Galerija, Pula, Croatia (2015); 'Sudo', Scheublein + Bak, Zurich (2015).

Damien Meade is the recipient of an Abbey Fellowship in Painting at The British School at Rome, commencing in April 2018. Other Fellowships and Awards include Churchill College, Cambridge University in association with Kettle's Yard (1994–1995); Irish Arts Council Travel Award (1992); Irish Arts Council Artist Bursary (1992).

Text by Olivia Fletcher

Olivia Fletcher is a writer and current student of 'Critical Writing in Art and Design' at the Royal College of Art, London. Having graduated from Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge in 2016, she has worked on a variety of projects, both curatorial and in writing. Most recently, Olivia was Writer-in-Residence at Rule Gallery in Marfa, Texas. For her other words and thoughts, visit www.viaolive.wordpress.com

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