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In Berlin, Nick Goss and His Uncanny World

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"Dolphin Express," 2018, Nick Goss. Pigment, oil, screenprint on linen. 180 x 230 cm.
(Courtesy of the artist and CFA Berlin)

A ghostly fish floating in an aquarium; a lone red chilly discarded on a plate; a yellow-eyed cat lazing about in bed. These image fragments sound unhurried, contemplative even, yet the title of Nick Goss' exhibition at Berlin's Contemporary Fine Arts, speaks of speed: "Dolphin Express." Hearing it you might think of these aquatic mammals playfully gliding through the waters beneath choppy waves. Conversely, Goss' large-scale oil-on-linen paintings conjure another time register altogether, one that is not about swiftness, but about stepping into a sinkhole that slowly swallows you up, or better still, gently vortexing into a whirlpool. His canvases are like quick sand: they sound fast, but in reality are calm and gradually pull you in, if you stand still for long enough.

The eponymous painting "Dolphin Express" (all works 2018) in fact gets its name from the artist's local minicab company and depicts a waiting room. Figures are discernible within a semi-abstract patchwork of pattern and color — bluey greens, burgundy, yellow. A hatted man tips back his head into sleep, while his banjo waits to be played; the person behind him

rests wearily, one hand draped over a chair against which they lean their face — indistinguishable features of eyebrows and nose barely mapped in. Near the center of the composition is a dial of sorts: a clock or speedometer. Unidentifiable, it too drifts into obscurity amid the surrounding translucent pigments. The effect is like being in a hazy dream: becoming lost, though not scarily so, more akin to seamlessly drifting through timeless worlds — down, down, deeper and deeper.

This scene indirectly conveys Goss' immediate physical environment; it also suggests his internal world, one where memory, imagination and fantasy coalesce. So too do the show's other paintings, which include "Southern" — portraying seated commuters on the London Underground — and "Morley's Mirror," immortalizing a café in Goss' neighborhood. In the former, the artist stretched the reverse of the canvas, pigment having subtly seeped through to hint at the essential form of sitting figures, or the haunting memory thereof. In the latter, a reflection in a mirror composed of many diamond panes is soft and washy, reminiscent of light reflecting upon wet bathroom tiles. Of course, painters have merged the world within and around them for centuries. Indeed, *good* figurative painting should do exactly that: imbue the real with a mood that is intangible, which captures a feeling and becomes metaphorical.

The quality that each of this exhibition's paintings have in common is their wateriness, and this is where Goss' metaphor lies. Descended from Dutch origins, the artist's family had to flee Zeeland because of the 1953 North Sea flood in the Netherlands, which followed a heavy storm one January morning — an environmental disaster that killed over 2,500 people in total. Goss has described how for this "body of work, I paid attention to images of people in transition," continuing that, "traveling to an undisclosed new home has drifted into the narrative." We might think, naturally, of the most-recent generation of displaced peoples, not least Syria's 11 million refugees (5 million outside of Syria), some having taken the dangerous and often perilous journey to cross the waters to Greece. Documented in newspapers read on the way to and from work, these images of humanitarian crisis flow into the conscious or subconscious mind of commuters, and if empathy functions as it should, we might carry a misty melancholy with us: onto the next train, into the café, as we climb into bed.

The relationship between surface and depth in Goss's practice is significant here. Alongside gestural brushwork, he also uses the method of screen-printing in isolated areas of his paintings; lined geometric patterns creating depthless jagged ripples. Combined with his pale and liquidy palette, the works are aesthetically flat, mottled and sparse, interspersed with patches of bare linen that act as sinkholes into which your eyes fall. There is a push and pull between Goss' watery shallows and the sense of longing, sadness and nostalgia that his images evoke — the ghosts that haunt our memories or lie in the imagination, beyond reach. Living in a changing world that is reacting to the effects of climate change and on-going wars, impermanence seems to be a state into which many are sinking, but is one that will likely last for a very long time. Accordingly, Goss leaves us with nothing solid or opaque to grasp at. The best we can do as viewers is dive past the surface into his uncanny world and see where the tides of his creations take us — sense where we might end up.

"Dolphin Express," works by Nick Goss, is on view at CFA, Berlin, through December 22. More information: http://cfa-berlin.de