

Josh Lilley

Nick Goss

Nine Mile Burn

9 October - 13 November 2020

Nick Goss made the paintings in this exhibition at his London studio, on a 183-metre oil tanker on the Adriatic Sea, and in a barn near the Scottish hamlet of Nine Mile Burn. This was his 2020 journey; he had not planned it that way. The paintings are the result of a single period of creation that began on the ship in January, but they were never conceived as a suite or series under a theme. This body of work, the Nine Mile Burn paintings, are a diffuse, new story. This exhibition, the artist's fifth at Josh Lilley, inaugurates the rebuilt and integrated galleries of 40-46 Riding House Street.

John Weinzierl, a Bavarian hippie attempting to shed his cultural skin in the late-'60s Munich art and music commune Amon Düül, described his struggle to find a path that belonged to him. He couldn't look west; he couldn't look east; he couldn't look back. "Space," he nonchalantly explained to a 2009 documentary crew, "was one solution." He looked up.

Nick Goss loves this idea, looking up, this expanded thinking born of necessity and logic. The notion of stumbling into the world beyond simply because you wanted more than the available options. Goss' paintings, built up and pushed back in layers both emphatic and delicate as skin, have long tangled with the transcendental world of dream and memory. He is a painter of atmosphere, and that other-worldly atmosphere is the effect of building a scene layer by layer, filling it with things he has picked up along the way. He believes in 'crackle', the late critic-paragon Mark Fisher's theory of grain, texture and barely perceptible phenomena as elements that allow art to haunt a viewer and find an unusual place in their brain. This classic mode of Goss' work is best embodied in the exhibition by Beach Fire, a final hiss of smoke in a scene of many layers that is both washed out and highly detailed. There's no placing the scene in space or time, but you're there. You've been there.

Movement small and large — walking down the street or being carried on the tide of migration — has been a steady theme in Goss' recent work, a three-year run of exhibitions curated into the Morley's Mirror survey show at Pallant House, Chichester, in 2019. Goss has investigated the metaphors of motion and all they can sustain, the dignity and fragility of humanity, and the nature of discovery, all under a haunting atmospheric haze. For *De Ramp*, his 2017 exhibition at Josh Lilley, documentary images of desperate exodus from the 1953 North Sea flood blended with the streets around the artist's studio. Overnight trains, waiting rooms and platforms defined many of his paintings around the 2018 CFA Berlin exhibition *Dolphin Express*; they produced a morse code of starting and stopping, progress and purgatory, with the landscape transforming in the background. The Nine Mile Burn paintings exhibited here represent the next trip.

Pool is a tall painting of a group of isolated, vertically stacked figures sitting at small tables. They're reading, drinking or hunching. The painting's depth of a field is a sliver, so fine that the composition sits on the surface, close to collage. The narrative asserts itself even as the tiles of the picture plane vibrate woozily: some people remain alone, no matter where they go. Goss described the idea of weaponized limbo, a term coined by the British writer Dan Fox to describe a state of systematic, undefeatable exclusion from the world. In a period of new forms of isolation, *Pool* seeks empathy and a clear eye on life in that atmosphere.

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In *Bakers Dolphin*, a throng of people crowd around to get on a long, boxy coach mint-green with age. These are day-tripping British folks; *Bakers Dolphin* is the name of a tour company — native, like the artist, to the West Country — that has been taking British people on adventures since 1889. The herd squeezes together and the painting disintegrates into a larval, molecular mass for a moment. It is suddenly a dense, gestural workout, an unaggressive Futurist riff. Pan out to the peculiarly high, pinched perspective of the composition, consider the scene, and it is a painting about the nature of discovery in different cultures. The desire for meaning through motion is universal, but it takes many forms.

Some of these journeys point inward. *Express* is a gently Symbolist, illustrational work depicting two figures, children or women, throwing newspaper into the night air. On the flying pages are radically scale-shifted screenprints of the front page of the Daily Express, a xenophobic British newspaper. At the top of the composition is an inky, twinkling sky of considerable beauty. These figures are playing in the world, testing it, to figure out its parameters and how it works. Discovery is also a long journey within, *Express* suggests.

Walking around the windy Nine Mile Burn studio in May, one of the artist's daughters found a moth. Moths are everywhere in Lothian in the spring, it turns out. He painted the moth, then found and painted two more. Multiplied in size to taller than two metres and cropped so that they are pressing to the edges of the frame, the moth paintings represent discovery at its apogee — a total surrender to the abstraction and magical order of nature, to the universes it contains. It is cosmic art, but it is matter of fact, earned and decisive, like John Weinzierl looking up in 1968 Munich after deciding that was his only option. The series led Goss here, to these paintings. That was the Nine Mile Burn journey, in the end.

Late in the process of putting this exhibition together, the artist noted that the Jersey Tiger, one of his moth subjects, is a recent arrival in London, coming only with the rising temperatures of the past five years. The moth is an interloper, a sign of evolution, and, as it happens, the exhibition's final, profound manifestation of living in motion and living inside your head.