

## Justin Mortimer

### *Kammer*

DSC is pleased to announce Justin Mortimer's first solo show in the Czech Republic. Curated by Jane Neal, the exhibition presents a series of compelling and darkly enigmatic new paintings by the British artist.

The works vary in scale from small, intimate portraits of partly shrouded figures, to larger paintings from Mortimer's 'Kammer' series (that when translated from the German, lends the exhibition its title). In English, 'kammer' becomes 'chamber' - a word associated with political assemblies, but also historically, with the most private of spaces - the bed chamber.

If we look closely at Mortimer's Kammer paintings, it is possible to find a recurrent, partly obscured figure on a bed, one leg protruding. There is a strong hint of a medical environment in these works. The screen confronting the viewer resembles a monitor designed to chart a patient's vital statistics. Ordinarily the subject in these kinds of scenarios would be perceived as passive - resigned to their situation and dependent on the doctors and nurses who tend them - but here surprisingly the 'patient' appears to be in control - of the screen near their bed but also of the aperture that is widening onto another world.

Mortimer himself has been that passive patient, willing time to pass, awaiting surgery and yet more pronouncements from doctors. There is then a personal reason why the artist focuses so pointedly on the lower limb. Mortimer was born with a twisted tibia that resulted in him having to endure endless operations and hospital visits as a child and young adult. He believes he saw: 'Far too much of what was going on under the surface of my skin than was good for me'. Not only was Mortimer exposed to the problematics of his own body, he was witness to the sufferings of others and disturbed by some of the more invasive aspects of their treatment. He remembers feeling intimidated by large hospital-related machinery such as the x-ray machine and the surgical dress code and hospital equipment paraded themselves through his nightmares. Given the lengthy spells Mortimer spent in hospital and the heightened tensions he was surrounded by while he was there, it is unsurprising that this intensely personal experience continues to infiltrate his psyche and play a part in informing his work.

Mortimer's explicit hospital references read like the script for a psychological thriller - only now he is the director calling the shots, not the actor awaiting instruction. It's a powerful role reversal and the combination of drawing from his direct experience as a patient and twinning this with an imagined means of escape makes for works that are emotionally charged. Empirical evidence is hard to dismiss and a desperate desire to flee reality is also very difficult to ignore. Together they are irresistible.

We find Mortimer's protagonists at a threshold. On the one hand captive in the midst of a hospital-like environment, on the other, hovering on the cusp of disappearing into a brave, new world. The artist has long held an interest in the subject of multi-verses, quantum physics and the idea of there being portals between worlds. Again it is not hard to imagine why the notion of being able to transport ourselves from a trying time and context to a more exciting alternative, has always held great appeal for Mortimer. If a different version of ourselves could exist elsewhere and not be in pain or weighed down by whatever irksome events were occurring on earth, who wouldn't at times be tempted to explore that possibility?

Mortimer's current reading list could be on the syllabus for a degree in science fiction and apocalyptic literature. Besides his interest in multiverses and the notion of the 'real' (he lists Haruki Murakami's '1Q84' and the central character Aomame's attempts to discover what is actually real, as one source of inspiration), Mortimer has read voraciously on the subject of dystopian futures following nuclear war, environmental disaster and the overhanging threat of potential human extinction.

Although the contemporary authors, Margaret Atwood, China Mieville and Yoko Ogawa have certainly piqued and held Mortimer's interest, J.G. Ballard's short stories have probably had the most powerful impact on the painter. Mortimer talks specifically about 'The Terminal Beach', published in 1964 (included in a collection of short stories which the author published under the same title). It is a classic Ballard story, where - like the majority of Ballard's writing - the main protagonist is a solitary figure within a strange and doomed situation. Despite this, Ballard's characters usually deal with their fate with a certain intellectual

detachment, contemplation, hallucinatory experimentation and eventually acceptance through revelation. There is at times the sense of them being able to step back and regard their own fate from the wings, almost as if it were happening to someone else - or as though they had found a way to escape their reality and witness it from elsewhere: there is a definite sense of perspective.

Though there is much darkness in Ballard's writing, if we allow ourselves to be drawn into his dystopian visions, there is also a strangely compelling beauty and pathos. The vistas Ballard describes are not without aesthetic appeal in their stark wildness (Derek Jarman also discovered this for himself in Dungeness, the site for a controversial nuclear power station), and Ballard brilliantly - but without fuss in spare, dry prose - evokes the nobility inherent in the tragedy of the human condition when man is confronted with certain disaster - be it nuclear or environmental.

It is not hard to see why Mortimer finds resonance between the works of Ballard who was writing some of his most powerful stories at the height of the Cold War, and his own paintings. Mortimer too is able to create this simultaneous sense of perspective and detachment for the viewer when confronted with his work. We feel as though we ourselves have stepped back in order to take in everything he lays out for us on his canvases: the hospital bed, the lone figure, the topography of the new world that beckons beyond - a snowy capped mountain hovering in our eye-line, almost within reach, tantalisingly close. Again in common with Ballard's writings, there is mystery, there is wonder, there is the promise or threat of the unknown and somewhere in the mix, there is always the inevitable darkness.

It could be that the darkness in Mortimer's paintings is not empty. Rather it is pregnant with things that are hidden or have been suppressed. We feel these as we look at the paintings, even if we cannot see them. It is an invisible communion between us and the artist. Perhaps some of these are linked to another personal angle of Mortimer's - one of fear undergirded with curiosity. His father was a naval helicopter pilot and would tell his son stories about the campaigns he was involved with. Mortimer remembers being worried that his father might die, but paradoxically - like many boys - he was also captivated by the idea of war and battle and would spend hours making military models and creating complex scenes depicting occupied houses, complete with miniature furniture. Already then, Mortimer was starting to devise dark plots and create theatres for his own protagonists.

The subject of war and all the drama that surrounds it has a long-established position in art history. From the Renaissance and the Baroque, through to Romanticism, art is riven with war imagery. Think of the battle paintings of Paolo Uccello, the glorified depictions of revolution by Jacques-Louis David, the heroic acts captured by Eugène Delacroix and the sadistic side of war that George Grosz evinced so brilliantly in his drawings. Certainly Mortimer stands in good company.

Like David before him, Mortimer is also an adept handler of flesh. Unlike David, much of the flesh in Mortimer's paintings is anything but smooth and alabaster-like. Mortimer's subjects often have something of Géricault's 'Raft of the Medusa' about them. They look like they have been subjected to an extreme situation. Sometimes they are passive, at other times apparently struggling to get away from a given context or even seemingly unaware that they are being observed - so starkly do they stare out from the canvas, looking way beyond the viewer in the portraits and uninhibited in their gestures and expressions.

Mortimer's protagonists do not just appear other-worldly because of their skin. They are framed by a strange aura composed of colours we might more readily associate with alien landscapes. Fluorescent greens are underscored by neon pinks, brilliant turquoises and acid yellows. Studying the artist's paintings it is impossible not to think of myriad science fiction films where energy fields are conveyed by pulsating swathes of colour. It is as if Mortimer's cast of characters is being propelled into another realm or sucked through a portal into another universe or time. Some of his subjects are captured crawling through impossibly vibrant, gloopy quagmires, others are using the tips of their fingers to tentatively push through a curtain of poisonous looking air. Several of Mortimer's protagonists are depicted with someone else's hands either tenderly stroking or probing their faces - we are left to decide whether the gestures are sensitive, even loving, clinical or sinister.

These animated hands are always depicted without the bodies we would expect to find attached. Perhaps it is a reference to 'Dr. Strangelove' or 'alien hand' syndrome, where a person experiences their limbs acting

independently, seemingly beyond their conscious control. It is also an effective metaphor for a functional disconnect between thought and action and suggests the possibility of there being another silent force at work.

These detached hands and strange landscapes are both disturbing and intriguing. Could it be that Mortimer's subjects are being drawn into a new world by invisible forces? Magnetic colour fields that pulse with energy or gravitational pull? Perhaps, but we definitely have the sense that they want to disappear. Like Caspar David Friedrich's 'Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog' (1818), where the subject is depicted from behind, atop a rocky precipice, gazing into an unknowable landscape because it is obfuscated by wreathing mists, so are Mortimer's protagonists looking out onto an unreadable new world, or unseeable future. In Friedrich's case, his afore-mentioned painting is widely regarded as epitomising a moment of self-reflection where the subject contemplates his path in life and his purpose, and the landscape plays into the territory of the sublime.

Mortimer can certainly be contextualised within the genealogy of respected figurative painters and his works owe much to the grand traditions of historical and romantic painting. Again like Friedrich before him who often chose to work on a smaller, as well as on a grander scale, Mortimer does not need a large ground in order to produce a powerful work. His small compositions, studies of faces, hands and sometimes feet, prove as compelling and arresting as a gargantuan canvas, such is the artist's eye for composition, colour and the power of suggestion. Placed in conjunction with his black, large, 'post disaster night-scapes' or to coin the artist's own description, his 'one foot in the apocalypse' paintings, and we find ourselves in the midst of a powerful, all-enveloping visual experience.

It is clear that Mortimer is able to propel us, as well as his protagonists into a brave, new world. His creations still resemble versions of the world we know, but his is a super-charged, uncanny reality. We, like his subjects, know what it is at times to find ourselves in a dark place, somewhere that is beyond description but somehow known and feared by everyone. We also hope for a window through which we - like Mortimer's subjects - can disappear. It is a compelling idea, a dream, yes, but one that can be given form and weight through paint. Mortimer's work pivots around this notion that springs from one of man's keenest hopes: that there might actually be a means of escape from reality and the potential of other, better worlds, beyond the chambers that hold us here.

Jane Neal