

DAVID EGAN

30 JANUARY – 14 MARCH 2015

ACTUALLY
ENERGY
HELP
LIGHT

David Egan's painting practice seems to exceed the physical properties of painting. In *Actually Energy Help Light*, as with previous exhibitions by Egan, painting is a fragment of the whole; even as it commands attention, it points away from itself to the parallel activities from which it has arisen. In so doing, Egan's paintings figure forth something that is invisible. In many cases he paints what Ian McLean has evocatively referred to as a veil: a signposted secret, a layer that simultaneously highlights or gives shape to that which it conceals.¹ Indeed invisibility — or more specifically, the contradiction of invisibility in painting — is a key structuring device in Egan's work. In this exhibition, he has painted the floral patterns from the versos of playing cards (a veil that hides the card player's hand), used the noxious flowering plant Morning Glory as a painterly pigment (which fades over time, while the plant itself expands laterally and rapidly to absorb as much sunlight from its surface area as possible), and created a 360-degree painting that encircles the viewer, and consequently cannot be glimpsed in its entirety from any one vantage point.

The two large canvases from the *Painting Playing Cards* (2013–) series, subtitled (*Owen Jones for De La Rue, c. 1850*), form part of an ongoing, serial painting project that reconstructs designs from the backsides of playing cards on canvas.² As Egan has explained, in this series, the playing card is made visible, but in this making visible there is an inherent invisibility as well. The verso of the playing card naturally alludes to the potential other side of the card; the other side of painting; the other side(s) of the artist's practice; the oeuvre, the research, the attitude, the words.³ Where previous iterations of *Painting Playing Cards* have juxtaposed different designs, have been installed so as to lean one on top of the other, or suspended as bilateral objects with text appended to the other side of the painting, the two *Painting Playing Cards* in this exhibition appear identical and sit side-by-side, as if

wallpapering the gallery. In this way, they reference an earlier work, *Escamotage* of 2013: a row of ten stylised landscape paintings, each new painting a repetition of the former, but each hand painted — thus riddling the set with minor discrepancies.

Running through the *Painting Playing Cards* and indeed connecting the paintings in the exhibition in a looping gesture is *Asparation Frieze*. Two perfectly ruled bands, one at waist-height, the other dropped a few centimetres from the ceiling, encircle the central gallery. Painted in green synthetic polymer paint using broccolini as a brush, the frieze references a different type of backstory to that of the cards: this one pertaining to the Australian landscape painter Tony Clark, who makes small landscape panels that can be added to and extended infinitely in a single line as part of a project called *Myriorama* (not dissimilar to Imants Tillers's life project, the *Book of Power*). An anecdote has circulated that Clark finds broccoli a useful paintbrush when painting trees (a readymade shape) in his landscapes, and there have been reports of finding fibres from the green vegetable in his paintings. Egan adapts the anecdote and uses the hybrid vegetable broccolini (Asparation or 'aspabroc' — the combination of asparagus and broccolini) instead. The two green bands are made up of daubs of dark green synthetic polymer paint and lighter green rubbings from the broccolini itself. It references a type of amateur home decoration strategy that seeks to 'tie the room together'.⁴ Once inside the gallery, the viewer must spin around to glimpse the entire frieze, which traces the interior perimeter of the room, but every turn to look at one section disappears another. Regardless of which painting you look at, the frieze is, as Egan explains, 'constantly reverberating in the periphery of your vision. It mobilises you to keep circling around the room.'⁵

Accordingly, a concurrent theme to concealment and invisibility in *Actually Energy Help Light* is movement, which each of the paintings either suggests, depicts or solicits. *Trellis* is a painting of the interior foyer of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam executed in a magenta pigment extracted directly from the sprawling, blue, vine plant Morning Glory. To this end, *Trellis* is related to another body of paintings by Egan that utilise flowers, grasses and vines as both paintbrush and pigment. The Morning Glory plant itself creeps laterally, suffocating vast tracts of fence, walls and rooftops if unimpeded, whilst the colour of the organic pigment on the cotton surface of the painting changes over time. The scene depicted is the interior foyer of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Strong verticals lead the eye up into a white-lit atrium; the darkest hues are the window and door voids; a hand-rail reaching out to the viewer in the exact centre of the lower edge leads you down a set of stairs into an unseen lower level, conjuring the distinct effect of a portal (as Tom Nicholson has aptly put it).⁶

The series of three untitled texts produce mental images of movement: one describes the drifting of coral matter through water; another tells the fantastical story of a decorative floral clock whose hands spin out of control to become a 'rotating guillotine' — slicing off the heads of flowers and sending them flying; the other describes the changing constitution of paper in an old book tucked away in a library. Hung in a line interspersed with a series of small oil paintings whose titles are — like the exhibition — lists of four words (*Hedges Haircut Sculpture Clock* or *Rot Vacuuming Outside Levels*), these fragments of visual and textual information provide alternative entry points to the entire body of work presented that, in Egan's words, 'can never fully tessellate'.⁷

Helen Hughes

1. Ian McLean, 'How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art', lecture, Melbourne Art Fair, Melbourne, 9 August 2012.

2. As Egan's research into the history of playing cards uncovered, the versos of playing cards were once blank (most memorably depicted in Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin's *The House of Cards*, c. 1735). When a social epidemic of card cheating broke out in the early nineteenth century, the versos were modified (covered up) to depict busy patterned surfaces. The two *Painting Playing Cards* in *Actually Energy Help Light* are transpositions of eighteenth-century playing card patterns designed by Owen Jones for the De La Rue company.

3. David Egan, 'Painting Playing Cards', Honours thesis, Monash University, Monash Art Design and Architecture, Melbourne, 2013.

4. Egan has explored painting as a form of pointing away from itself in other mediums, including delegated performance. For his three-person exhibition *Hire a magician to speak on your behalf, he is a great entertainer and the audience is blown away* (with Patrick Miller and Reece York at TCB Art Inc. in 2013), the artists hired a professional magician for the opening night and gave him instructions to intercept any viewers who were trying to look at the art objects (including his own paintings) with magic tricks.

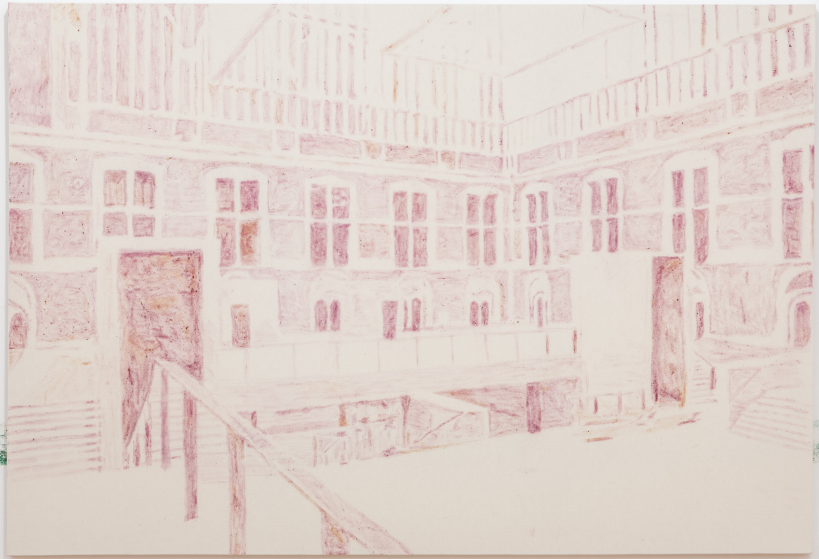
5. David Egan in *Urgent, Concept, Board, Meeting: Honours dialogue #4: David Egan interviewed by Nick Smith and Tom Nicholson* (Melbourne, 2013), pp. 5–6.

6. Tom Nicholson in *Urgent, Concept, Board, Meeting: Honours dialogue #4: David Egan interviewed by Nick Smith and Tom Nicholson* (Melbourne, 2013), pp. 5–6.

7. David Egan in *Urgent, Concept, Board, Meeting: Honours dialogue #4: David Egan interviewed by Nick Smith and Tom Nicholson* (Melbourne, 2013), p. 13.









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Curated by Helen Hughes

Gertrude Contemporary
30 January – 14 March 2015

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Image captions

Installation view:
Actually Energy Help Light, 2015
Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne
Photo: Christo Crocker

Painting Playing Cards (Owen Jones for De La Rue, c. 1850), 2015
Synthetic polymer paint on cotton with frame
189 x 135 cm
Photo: Christo Crocker

Trellis, 2015
Blue morning glory (*Ipomoea indica*)
on cotton
135 x 189 cm
Photo: Christo Crocker

Installation view:
Actually Energy Help Light, 2015
Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne
Photo: Christo Crocker

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