

An essay by Paul Clinton to accompany the
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Awkward Spaces: experiencing Flo Brooks' *Angletwitch*.

'I make sense of things through lived experience' writes Flo Brooks.¹ It's true that his paintings are full of scenes from his life and references to his trans-male identity, which lend his observations on gender, capitalism and community an authenticity, signalling 'I was there, this is what I experienced.' But gritty social realism they are not, being full of visual puns, stickers, badges and slogans, which indicate his paintings are representations, not reality. He seems to be caught between two opposing accounts of experience described by historian Joan Scott: as concrete evidence or linguistic fiction. The former, favoured by historical-materialists, Scott claims, argues that knowledge gained first-hand, through presence, gives us reality in the raw, to which queers object, that this ignores how experiences and the subjects who have them, are produced by social norms and language.² Do material conditions shape consciousness or does thought invent reality? As unquestioned truth, experience risks being essentialist, but understood to be fully constructed, it leaves no room for collective struggle borne of real experiences, or for the truth of embodiment for trans people. Brooks' work instead offers a slapstick account of experience, both materialist and constructed, showing where the two meet at the point where language breaks down.

Angletwitch may be Brooks' most experiential show to date, with his paintings housed in a barn-like structure next to a faux-visitor centre, to evoke his experience as a queer person living in England's economically depressed countryside. His paintings show a world of markets and livestock auctions, farming and repair-work, cream teas and ageing populations, Post Office closures and dwindling subsidies, places with few people and fewer opportunities, where little changes apart from occasional new faces in the form of day-trippers. Brooks depicts this sense of stalled progress as most keenly felt by isolated young queers: the plight of being the only gay in the village is hinted at

¹ Artist's statement for CCA Brighton exhibition.

² Scott, Joan, 'The Evidence of Experience', 1991, *Critical Enquiry*, Vol.17, No. 4, pp. 773-797.

by a lone, androgynous hiker wearing a badge ironically declaring 'we have to stop meeting like this'. Other signs reference the need to go undetected as queer, to 'pass' as cis or straight, as in a placard designating the countryside as a 'Passing Place', or another that says there is 'No Trespassing' in nature. It's not clear if these communities really are oppressively straight, or if Brooks' paintings refer to the 'metronormative'³ bias in queer culture, which equates small town with small-minded, and the city with freedom. This class distinction, between the provincial and the sophisticated, is perhaps reinforced by the economic neglect of rural areas and the commercialisation of queer culture, where participation means being able to afford entry to the club or the right clothes to wear. Brooks certainly presents the countryside as governed by manual labour, farming, repairing and cleaning. Marxists such as Sue Ellen Case and Donald Morton have long argued that queer culture is bourgeois, unconcerned with the conditions of working-class life. To argue that the subject is performative or linguistically determined, Case argues, is to deny the importance of material, non-semiotic, realities, particularly the 'working, sweating body' or economic forces.⁴ According to Case and Morton, this makes queer theory complicit in the mass-market, where signs and objects are abstracted from the conditions and people that made them, like the free floating symbols in Brooks' paintings. Queer thereby amounts to an 'idealist'⁵ belief that reality can be remade simply by being performed differently, with no structural constraints.

Case and Morton's opposition between working class authenticity and queer artifice is uncomfortably reminiscent of homo-trans-phobic arguments that queerness is an unnatural, bourgeois affectation.⁶ But Brooks shows how the pure and the inauthentic are difficult to tell apart. A 'female' rubber sex doll abandoned in the mud or a donut and sausages suggestively strung in a bush, at once signal the heterosexuality of the countryside, but also the perversity and artifice of so-called natural desires. His work invokes definitions of the natural and material only to make them lose their definition. Indeed, for him the queerness of his work lies not in his life story, but in 'visual puns and irony, provoking and belittling symbols of normativity.'⁷

Brooks shows wildflowers in the process of being cut; cattle wearing rosettes; land and bodies commodified and exploited – an exhausted farm-worker wears a number meant for a cow at auction. Hikers visiting the countryside looking for an authentic way of life, would be sadly disillusioned – pure physicality and nature are concepts that have been abstracted and reified, only to be sold back to alienated tourists. All this points to queer-Marxist Kevin Floyd's argument that capitalism wants to present manual labour as a kind of 'second nature', not work at all, but simply a fact of life.⁸ Case and Morton's attempts to

³ Halberstam, Jack, *Queer Time and Place*, 2005, New York: NYU Press, p. 36.

⁴ Case, Sue Ellen, 'Towards a Butch-Feminist Retro-Future', *Queer Frontiers*, 2000, ed. Cindy Sarver, Uni of Wisconsin Press, p. 28

⁵ Morton, Donald, 'Queer Materialism', *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2016, ed. George Ritzer, John Wiley & Sons, p. 2.

⁶ Such arguments recur in Marxism, from Theodor Adorno to the American Socialist Worker's Party which excluded gay members on the grounds that it was a bourgeois condition. David Allyn, *Make Love Not War*, 2016, Taylor and Francis, p. 158.

⁷ Flo Brooks quoted in an interview with Louise Benson in 'Five Questions', *Elephant*, Feb 2019.

⁸ Floyd, Kevin, *The Reification of Desire*, 2009, Minneapolis: Uni. Of Minnesota Press, pp. 106-107.

distinguish matter from culture likewise risk presenting aspects of life as non-discursive and thus beyond question, as well as ignoring how some bodies and identities are excluded as immaterial or unnatural. Brooks shows how material and cultural can't be separated: cultural distinctions of nature/artifice, matter/culture, consistently fail to name and contain experience, and in doing so reveal powerful socio-economic interests at play in defining what matters and who doesn't. And in its capacity for contesting norms of the natural, in work and play, the countryside starts to look more than a little queer. Goodness knows what goes on there for a sex doll to end up in the mud. This failure of discourse, and blurring of material/linguistic boundaries, may offer a model of experience that is open to queers, and closer to what Brooks seems to capture. Kate Love has argued that when we talk about having an experience, what we describe is a process of grappling with language. 'When I say "I've had an experience"' Love writes, we describe a feeling or occurrence that hasn't yet been pinned down into 'knowing or understanding'.⁹ It is felt, an 'approach of the world', that forces a 'negotiation *with* language', within language, but without being assimilated into it. Here meanings become contested, fluid, open. This version of experience as both felt and semiotic, but neither wholly constructed nor essentialist, may be useful for thinking about trans people's attachment to the embodied truth of their sex or gender, at precisely the moment where the meaning of those terms becomes porous. The value of experience may then be, as it is in Brooks' paintings, in loosening up or contesting normative representations and assumptions, showing where other accounts of the world become available.

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⁹ Love, Kate, 'The Experience of Art as a Living Through of Language', *After Criticism*, ed. Gavin Butt, Blackwell Pub., p. 169.