

FrameWork 12/20

Alejandro Tamayo on Kevin Yates and Sara Maston

To disclose:

The premonition of an event

The event of a premonition

The presentation of a representation

The materiality of the Earth

There is a historical record that places *Tecumseth Street* (2020), the modest sculptural object one encounters upon entering the exhibition, in an intimate line of events: there is another *Tecumseth Street* made by Yates twelve years ago. The earlier version, of the same electrical pole located at the corner of the gallery, is a scaled replica made of bronze, aluminum, steel, cedar, and plastic, and it includes a perfectly working light fixture. In this version, the always-lit street light poetically introduces the viewer into the context of the night. But the newer version, which is one inch taller and made of bronze and cedar, not only exposes a dramatic charred surface but an erratic tilting light. This pulsating light, like an unrecognizable morse code, no longer conveys the poetics of the night. Its malfunction immerses the viewer in the context of something tragic, and one cannot tell by looking at it if the context surrounding the object is the night or the day.

In contrast to the modest size of *Tecumseth Street*, the other sculptural pieces of Yates in the show are massive, and one is tempted to say monumental. These other pieces are 1 to 1 replicas of everyday billboards, and, in spite of their size, they also expose all around their skin the indexical evidence of a consuming fire.

In their gallery rendition, Yates's poetic objects seem to transmute the personal and subjective into the "objective" space of the visitor. His personal facts become external objects for the viewer to encounter. But, in what time are Yates's sculptures located? Are they vestiges of a personal fire, or signs of a fire that awaits for us in the future? In their actuality they seem to operate like vectors pointing in both directions.

Just behind *Tecumseth Street*, one encounters Sara Maston's *Meri Looking Away* (2016), the oil rendition of a pet budgie that is turning its head away from the viewer. Rather than a reference to the history of painting (although inevitably, Gerhard Richter's *Betty* (1988) comes to mind), this work appears to me as an open question, and as an attitude towards the future.



Betty, 1988 by Gerhard Richter, Saint Louis Art Museum

The other works of Maston in the show are large scale paintings and present different relations to the wall, the floor, and ceiling. In these paintings the figure and background dissolve into one another and one has to spend time with the work in order to discern the figurate from the abstract. Nature, or a particular idea of nature, such as its exuberance and vital forces, permeate throughout the work. There are symbolic images that move from one painting to another, and they explore different notions of representation. A white snake appears first as a painted fact, and then again as a concrete object that is being tamed by the weight of the canvas.

Maston's paintings are certainly paintings, and Yates's sculptures are certainly sculptures, they do not expose ontological questions about their own nature, what they seem to share is a concern with representation. Maston was invited by Yates to share the space of the gallery, and the show is a dialectical integration of their works. This simultaneity of art practices, where Yates's sculptures give context to Maston's paintings, and Maston's paintings give context to Yates's sculptures, produces a cacophony of time and a multiplicity of meanings.

The show invites multiple readings and re-readings, and invites the eye, and the body, to travel back and forth between the images and the physicality of objects, and even from the first to the second floor of the gallery and back again just to spend more time in an overlooked detail.

But it is Maston's smallest painting, *Meri Looking Away*, located at the entrance of the exhibition, what to me helps to bind the different pieces together. It conjures up the words of Walter Benjamin in the ninth of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History". His writing was inspired by his encounter with a little painting by Paul Klee, which is almost the same size of *Meri*. In this painting, which Benjamin eventually bought, he saw the concrete manifestation of his theory of the "angel of history", which to him is being blown backwards into the future by a strong wind meanwhile it keeps looking back to the past:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹

The *Angelus Novus* cannot help but keep looking into the past meanwhile he tries unsuccessfully to resuscitate the dead. The angel cannot turn his head because the wind coming from Paradise is too strong and all he sees are ruins that accumulate one after the other.



Angelus Novus, 1920 by Paul Klee, Israel Museum, Jerusalem

But there is no wind in the room, and *Meri* is able to turn his head. He is looking away from the viewer, and away from the past, and by doing so he is staring directly into the future. What is *Meri* seeing? Are Yates's sculptures vestiges of the past, or a premonition of the future?

Or maybe there is a wind, but this time is faint and is coming in the opposite direction. After all, Paradise might not be an idea for something that only exists in the past, but for something that still awaits for us in the future. Maybe the exuberance of nature that one finds in Maston's paintings is what awaits for us after the consuming fire ends, when the phoenix comes out from the ashes.

December 24, 2020

¹ Benjamin, Walter, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books, 1968: 257-258.