

Will Nolan

Trace elements - Catalogue Essay

The sight of graffiti – whether small, quick tags dashed onto suburban fence posts or the large-scale pieces that inevitably appear on any empty wall – is a common one in the urban landscape. Left intact or covered up, graffiti occupies a dichotomous position: on the one hand dismissed or condemned as merely the detritus of an anti-social activity, something to be frowned upon, cleaned up, covered over, erased. On the other (and in other circles), it is a celebrated form of self-expression to which is attached considerable cachet, and one whose role as a new form of both anthropological ritual and artefact is well documented.

Will Nolan's photographic work takes neither of these positions, but instead identifies and documents the traces left behind in the struggle. In his concise imaging of these contested spaces, Nolan's photographs act as witness to both the initial acts of marking and the subsequent act of covering up. Panels of bright white against dull cream, not-quite-matched purples, blues and reds, the feathered edges of roller-applied pink-on-pink: each patch and daub stands for an occurrence in the everyday history of the building and those who use it. The scenes possess an inherent and formal beauty, by virtue of their close-up arrangement of lines, colours and shapes, yet are also framed in such a way as to be coolly documentary. So presented, we are able to inspect closely each unique set of marks, the swirls and whorls of the layered strokes. While one might consist of only a flat panel of differently-textured paint, so that we can but imagine what lies beneath, another's over-painting follows the original marks so clearly and exactly that it's curious, almost touching, to imagine the repairing arm (belonging to a council worker, tradesman, irate shopkeeper perhaps) tracing those same loops and curves as the arm which first made them.

These surface scars are perhaps similar to those found on our own bodies, the physical traces of incidents and accidents that may be covered but not erased. Testament to various events and occurrences, they leave behind tell-tale signs that disrupt and mar the building's or the body's surface. These may, to a point, be 'fixed' - the skin heals, the wall's surface is painted clean yet again; events may be forgotten, misfortunes accepted, circumstances cast in a new light. Yet the past remains, even buried under layers of new paint, new memories, new skin.

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