

# RUPERT NORFOLK

Dicksmith Gallery, London  
10 March to 22 April 2005

Reviewed by Andrew Hunt

At first sight one could have easily mistaken Rupert Norfolk's exhibition at Dicksmith to be a traditional affair, albeit diverse and eccentric in form. Small drawings, tapestry and steel sculpture carefully occupied the two floors of the gallery without any apparent difficulty for the viewer. In reality, each work provided a variation on a formal complexity that's existed in Norfolk's work for a number of years. His three-dimensional objects usually share a concern for the materials they utilise, and reference a methodology or logic evident in early conceptualism and minimalism. Despite first appearances, this is definitely something that his recent works on paper have begun to play with.

Drawings such as *Animals* (2004) rely predominantly on a monochromatic pictorial device situated in a shallow depth of field. In this image, an owl, a bear, a deer, and a parrot all vie for attention in a crowded space. The contorted expressions of the portraits are highly unnatural, and are energised by a dumb exuberance that seeks to spill out from the picture's frame. With the deer staring straight out at the viewer, the parrot's eye striving for space in the bottom left hand corner of the picture, and the owl's presence appearing to cause the bear's head to fold in on itself, it's as if they've all crammed into a photo booth and the shutter's snapped at the wrong moment. The source of each character is actually taken from a selection of toy rubber masks – hence the thin plasticity of each representation, the tension in the shallow space between each portrait and the ambiguity in the picture as a whole.

*Foliage* (2005) presents another flattened picture, this time of leaves and fauna, behind which stare a pair of eyes in a rather concerned manner. Again the origin of the drawing is artificial; the 'foliage' is taken from mass-produced woven models of plants, and like *Animals*, the eyes in the drawing are non-human, and are taken from a model of a small pig. Fragile expressive marks threaten imminent failure within this drawing, not only through overworking and the periodic disintegration of the paper's surface, but also through the reproduction of gestural misrepresentations in the plastic foliage. Because each of these marks serve as accurate reproductions of the artificial patterning within each woven leaf – rendered complete with strands of disintegrating fabric – they also sit uncomfortably within the larger cohesion of the picture, and the overall photographic form of representation in the drawing. Beyond initial impressions, this provides the illusion of natural forms that exist in sync with their mechanically generated counterparts – in a similar, yet far more successful manner to the very kitsch items the drawings refer to. This time, partly through the image's flattened perspective – and the plastic agility of the creature's semi-sweet anxious glare – the work provides a sharp and claustrophobic representation of an already simulated nature.

If these two drawings deal with the superficial illusion of depth, then *Bamboo* (2004) – back lit and far more mechanical – takes on this task from another perspective. The sense of space in this drawing is different

from the others due to the removal of any firm ground. This time a mainly flattened image of artificial wire-strengthened bamboo snakes both over and into endless space, while shallow depth exists in the form of leaves that are rendered transparent and sinuous by the harsh lighting from behind. A strange beauty's at play here: the drawing shimmers on the paper like an apparition as much as it becomes a poorer, frailer and more flawed representation of the low materials it utilises.

Norfolk's three-dimensional works attempt a similar betrayal of materials through works such as *I Beams* (2003). This series of four small steel joists are airbrushed in such a way that the painted reflections on each surface correspond and contradict themselves depending on one's position in relation to them. The various colours used – most of which heighten and over-extend the metallic surface to some degree – add to the skewed reading of minimalist sculpture.

Seen in relation to *Pixelweave* (2004), an Aubusson tapestry made with traditional techniques, the overall tension between integration and separation became starkly clear. Woven in a meticulous manner, the tapestry's gridded pattern twists and overlaps to represent how light would fall on it as an elegantly crumpled and ridged blanket. Laid on the floor and reformed, with each crease mirroring the changes in its pattern, the work becomes a plastic representation of itself and operates in a similar way to *I Beams and Foliage*. The threads described in *Foliage's* woven leaves are the very substance of *Pixelweave's* physical structure, while, like *I Beams*, its woven pattern of creases snap into focus once seen from a certain twisted viewpoint or perspective. Like the sublime yet camp experience of facing the harsh glow of *Bamboo*, or the glare of competing eyes in *Animals*, from a certain angle, it's as if Norfolk has turned the focus or perspective back on ourselves, in order that we see the artificial in its true light.

Rupert Norfolk, *Leaves*, 2005

