

The Double Desire

Light breaks beyond the black trees and we glimpse it, framed by foliage. As imagined, its textures are different, softer, its architecture outlandish: angular modernism crossed with wigwams and snaggleteeth. An impossibly vast pink-orange sun is sliding behind liquid green hills and runic geometries dance in the air, speaking a formal language we don't understand, though we'd like to. Even if we weren't wholly sure of our destination, we've clearly arrived. Is this, somehow, Singapore? Hold that thought, though certainly Bob Matthews produced his new handmade/digital hybrid images – fragments of watercolour, manipulated photography and a diversity of interstitial photo-derived drawings, stitched and sequenced on the page that is the screen – in response to a residency in the Southeast Asian city-state. Some potentially useful, potentially overemphatic ancillary info: almost a quarter of Singapore is forest, and it has a rainforest climate: the world's fourth-largest financial centre grew out of a jungle. Shade is a commodity here, and windows are plastered with vinyl decals that filter light through graphics: often advertisements, since Singapore – where shopping is the national sport – is in many ways consumerism embodied.

Outsiders from Alexis de Toqueville onwards have often offered surprisingly clear views on foreign climes; perhaps applicable here is Malcolm Gladwell's 'thin-slicing' theory concerning the adaptive unconscious, expressed in *Blink* (2005), that the more information one has on a given subject, the harder it is to reach a conclusion on it. Yet Matthews' images are complexly hued; they are not quick takes on a place that claim to speak for it; they are not, arguably, specifically *of* Singapore but, rather, have a ramifying remit. To understand why, it's worth bearing in mind first the historical arc of his practice.

Much of Matthews' previous work has concerned itself, in protean fashion, with countercultures and alternative communities that he has personally engaged with: ZEGG, the Centre for Experimental Culture Design southeast of Berlin, for example, and Christiania in Copenhagen. These societies, once freewheeling but often increasingly conservative, are residues of the last century's experiments in alternative social structures, complexly related to a modernist optimism that looks increasingly threadbare. Matthews' art has increasingly thrummed with ambivalence about these miniature societies: his heart seems drawn to them while his head tallies evidence and expresses doubts that show up in his paintings' imagery. Earlier one might have found misty cues to habitation of forested wilds – crystals and mobiles that look like community art projects, conifers ridged with streamers and lights (*Caravan*, 2004), monuments shaped like futuristic guitars (*Chorus*, 2006), inferring that something, without dropping the veils concerning what, was transpiring in the greenery under collective human auspices. More recently, though, and tellingly, one encounters the motif of a floating limp fist (*Hand*, 2008), wreathed in ambiguity of intent and even ontology.

Matthews' Singaporean works arise out of this meeting of prior practice and the specificity of his temporary new home. Singapore is not a place that harbours alternative, pacifist or polygamous communities along European or American templates: it's at once very conservative and young enough as an independent city-state that so-called countercultural ideas filter into its mainstream. Rather than bifurcating into inside and outside, it divides on ethnic lines: Chinatown, Little India, etc. You go looking for the edge and maybe you locate it in history, in how the place rose laboriously from steaming jungle rather than chasing romantic harmony with nature. Or in a reverie: how, as in a dream or a dystopian or gothic novel, vinous tentacles might rise up to undo the rigorous finance-driven order that humanity has imposed on it.

These works, then, are about a process of interpreting and a resultant equivocal complex of findings. It's no accident that we are situated, as viewers, on a kind of darkened outside, peering at glowing, dreamlike centres: centres that, because they are watercolour as against the photographic sharpness of the decal-like arrays of black flora and graphic abstraction that divide us from them, feel unreal even as they beckon us. In one case, a wistful greenish sunken garden dotted with angular monuments is seen through what seems like a tilted window with laser-blue edging. A squadron of halftone dots edges in from the upper right: we're at once in the wilds and in the city, standing inside an air-conditioned shop, dodging the heat, looking out at a state of possibility. Is this Singapore as it might be under a different model than hyper-capitalism? Perhaps, or maybe it's the metropolitan's mirage: a world where we're not atomised, not rushed, not menaced by advertising. If that's what you're architecting or projecting, it pays not to put in too many details. There are no people here, few cues to what is going on. The airborne geometric forms, loosed from the ground (a process begun in works like *Hand Shadow Midnight* (2010), wherein formerly architectural aspects like domes and pyramids became weightless), are less like tangible objects than signatures of clandestine unorthodox living. We look at these scenes and their dreamy details with the unnerving sensation that they're projections, anticipative but phantasmal.

The above musings laminate Matthews' works with a fairly strict narrative, but it's also possible to read them a step further back, to consider them more reflexively, as not about finding but about seeking. An artist on a residency arrives with eyes peeled and ears bent: looking for a vista, looking for significance. Matthews' new works arrest themselves at that questioning point, rather than presenting thoroughgoing conclusions – rather, arguably, than enacting a metaphoric colonisation. As such, this isn't a detour from his habitual practice so much as a reframing of it in a new environment, one in which different registers of avidity dovetail: Matthews' art, one might say, has forever been about the psychology of desiring something more, solidified in the form of alternative communities: the chase and the yearning, rather than the thrilled discovery and the promulgation.

And his longing, cut with scepticism but seemingly ineradicable, is ours too. Return to the art: we are again standing in darkness, looking out at the light as it's filtered through tropical gymnosperms and ferns. Again there's the inference that this is a window: its contours are purple this time and halftone crystals and globes float above us, conflating magic with commercial decals. On the far side of this monochromatic hubbub is a polychrome pleasure: hard to see fully, but convoking greenery and water and mountainous architecture. The feeling of what we want being glimpsed but obstructed is familiar, timeless: it might remind one of the fields of bracken and dirt that John Constable sowed in the foreground of so many paintings, asking the eye to hurdle in order to reach a tiny sunlit field in the distance. We are a long way from Suffolk here or even England in general, yet what's articulated is universal: things as they might be, forever just out of reach.

Martin Herbert, 2011