



COASTAL SIGNS

Taylor J. Wagstaff

Smooth Signs

11 February - 12 March 2022

Coastal Signs is pleased to present *Smooth Signs*, a solo exhibition of new painting by Taylor J. Wagstaff.

The works in *Smooth Signs* are paintings of highly circulated digital images, typically fashion images, taken from the internet and adjusted to fit an generic 'large painting' canvas size. The paintings are uniform in style and scale. The distortion of the image depends on how well or ill they fit the dimensions of the painting; in some it's imperceptible, while others are obviously warped. They are photo-realist, but evidently hand-painted; most apparently in sensuous soft-focus blending and, on closer inspection, passages that seem less concerned with photographic detail and more with painterly play.

In *Smooth Signs* seemingly simple formal decisions offer further clues to the nature of the artist's inquiry into image consumption and the social media economy. The images are always enlarged, so that what would previously be screen size is now close to human size. The act of scaling up reflects the inflationary nature of social media and the exaggeration of beliefs that the medium relies upon to generate endless spectacle. The distortion and warp mimics what happens when files are shared through multiple users and platforms (re-sized, cropped, degraded) but also alludes to the uncomfortable and entangled transition of an image from one cultural field and symbolic economy to another.

In Wagstaff's work, fashion images are used for their legibility as high-functioning cultural signs. Fashion is a fast-moving, trend-based image economy, notorious for its increasingly exuberant consumption and commodification of subcultures or countercultures. The artist's interest in performed authenticity in the current image economy is apparent in references to 'punk' in the paintings. Ripped jeans, a heavily pierced ear, even the ads for fake Ray Ban sunglasses, are signs that may have previously signalled a radical or subversive identity position or attitude, but are now ubiquitous. Emptied of any meaning or novelty they may have once claimed, these styles are then resurrected by a new generation of consumers, rinse and repeat. As Roland Barthes famously described it, fashion is 'a kind of machine for maintaining meaning without ever fixing it.'

The images in *Smooth Signs* may seem impersonal, but are in fact specific to both the artist's peer group and taste economies specific to the broader art world. Take for example the image of a model walking the crowded runway of the now iconic Prada Spring Summer 1991 show. The image is chosen for its original meaning (as emblematic of a cresting wave of 90s minimalism, the era of androgynous 'elevated essentials'), and for how that sign has been metabolised, or cannibalised, since. *Smooth Signs* seems to understand the drastic compression in style's eternal return, accelerated by the chimeric logic of the algorithm that takes us from Prada-clad dealers stalking the halls of Art Basel to edge-seeking art kids wearing 90s Prada-derived corporate wear (including pointy-toe kitten heels) in the club, and everything in between.

Perhaps more critically, and cynically, in *Smooth Signs* fashion is a cipher for the ways in which the web is structurally engineered to exploit our every flickering human desire, organising them into data sets and marketing them back to us almost instantaneously. In Wagstaff's paintings fashion is rarely just clothes, it is also bodies, fashion's principal mode of display. There is a lot of flesh in these paintings—a tanned knee pushes out of ripped jeans, a sideways giant foot hits the runway in a Miu Miu sandal, the distorted legs of a model in a tiny Prada mini; one painting, *Punk Ear Earrings (Adjusted to Fit)*, is almost all flesh and metal. It's well known that algorithms, designed to measure 'arousal' on the part of the user, privilege images of people, of bodies. In this moment of shifting sexual norms, where technology has replaced human intimacy with virtual pleasures, certain types of images remain in high circulation precisely because the user's desires are unfulfilled.

There is an ambivalence toward painting's role and cultural efficacy in *Smooth Signs*.

If, in the social media era, differentiation between fashion and painting is facile because all mediums have collapsed into image, what does the painted image offer us that the digital image can't?

In their choice of subject matter the artist seems all too aware that the success of an image (and increasingly now an artwork) is based on accrual of reputation online; on follows, likes, shares on a network. The paintings in *Smooth Signs* are seductively mediagenic; they anticipate their own afterlife, the inevitable re-absorption into the endless scroll.

Not only are these grid-compliant images, designed to circulate easily in a virtual marketplace, they take the form of paintings; the art world's most commodified and tradeable medium. This charge is perhaps disclosed most clearly in *Credit Card Chip (Adjusted to Fit)*; a painting of exactly that: a giant credit card chip that fills the entire canvas. There is a kind of perverse, knowing realism to this work; it is a painting of currency and about currency, in all senses of the word.

However, with their stubborn materiality and lush painterly finish, the works could be seen to celebrate painting as a therapeutic form, as a time-and-space antidote to the virtual 'soft pleasures' of our backlit devices. *Smooth Signs* asks us to consider several contradictory thoughts at once, and makes an argument for a kind of productive cynicism. We can understand that our lives are organised by Big Tech, and understand that there is no outside or ahead of the attention economy feedback loop, and still find tactics to restore criticality and sensuality in the frictionless flow.

Taylor J. Wagstaff (b. 1991) completed a BFA at Massey University Wellington in 2013, an MFA at Elam School of Fine Arts Auckland in 2015, and is currently enrolled in Elam's doctoral programme which he hopes to complete sometime this year.