

## CHARLIE HAMMOND THE SWEATS

OPENING TUESDAY, 11 SEPTEMBER 2012, 6 – 9 PM

EXHIBITION 12 SEPTEMBER – 3 NOVEMBER 2012

*None of my inventions came by accident. I see a worthwhile need to be met and I make trial after trial until it comes. What it boils down to is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.*  
(Thomas Edison, 1929)

Sweating is an involuntary bodily action, an automatic response to heat, to strenuous work or exercise, to feeling nervous, angry, fearful or embarrassed. What, then, might it have to do with the deliberate work of making art or, more specifically, making paintings? Is painting really such hard work, or such a source of nervousness, fear, embarrassment that it causes the artist to break into a sweat? If Charlie Hammond's new series of paintings insist over and over again on a relationship between sweating and the activity of putting paint on canvas, they don't do so in order to valorize painting as strenuous, masculine, heroic labour, as a spontaneous or automatic process, or even as an especially anxious endeavour. Nor do they utilize any of the usual tropes of labour-intensive painting, being neither especially large in scale, intricately detailed or heavily worked, or painstaking in illusionistically concealing the work that has gone into their making. Instead of any of this, they present painting as a persistent effort, sustained across days and weeks in the studio, to work out how paintings might work today, and what relationship they might have to other forms of work. *The Sweats* is seriously absurd and absurdly serious, as perhaps any artworks that reckon with work in our time must be.

No exemplary or anatomically coherent working body is pictured in *The Sweats*, but because they all incorporate a representation of effort – the repeated motif of a right-angled arm and armpit, stained by cloud-like sweat patches – they make work and working their subject. Sweat could be read as a mark of sincerity here – you are not just going through the motions if you break into a sweat, you are really working, you really mean it, you really feel it. Hammond's paintings should indeed be read as embodying an entirely sincere, committed approach to the daily work of painting, but they don't treat sweat as the mark or guarantor of authenticity. In *The Sweats* the sweaty reality of work is reduced to a mere *sign* for work. As Roland Barthes notes of the sweating faces in the 1958 film *Julius Caesar*, sweat, once treated as a sign, is ambiguous: "it presents itself at once as intentional and irrepressible, artificial and natural, manufactured and discovered."<sup>1</sup> This ambiguous play between sincerity and simulation, nature and artifice, in *The Sweats* allows Hammond to avoid some of the embarrassing pitfalls into which painting can fall when it tries too earnestly to picture itself as work, or to picture, empathetically, the work of others. The work evoked here is an anonymous and seemingly interminable toil, the character and aim of which is never quite specified. Those figures that do appear in the collaged canvases are composite and caricature-like entities, pieced together from the fragments of other works. Might these pictures, then, embody the work that an artist does to realize and rework an idea, to extend it in a series, to make an exhibition of it, and to put his work back into the world?

If the works are about painting, they are also pointedly about painting's uncertain relationship to a transformed world of work. Amongst the phenomena Boltanski and Chiapello identify with what they

term the 'new spirit' of 'networked capitalism' is 'the extension to an ever greater number of wage-earners of the lack of any distinction between time at work and time outside work, between personal friendships and professional relationships, between work and the person of those who perform it'.<sup>ii</sup> The freedom, autonomy and creativity once identified with artistic work, are now recuperated as the prerogatives of capital. This, above all, is what makes the effort to think about art as work such a sweat-inducing business. The works in *The Sweats* make no explicit reference to these transformations, and indeed have a formal and metaphoric vocabulary which seems to look back to archaic forms of manual labour, most clearly in the suggestions of agricultural implements and clothing which appear in several paintings. However, this collapse of the distinction between work and worker forms the backdrop to *The Sweats*, which continues Hammond's practice of alluding to the personages, attitudes and lexicons which emerge from this 'new spirit' and its spurious progress. Hammond displaces the special status of artistic work by indexing it to a marker of undistinguished, quotidian effort, of the daily grind. Sweat is, in these works, the solvent that appears to dissolve the separation between artistic and non-artistic labour, without, however, reconciling the two or resolving the tension between them.

Dominic Paterson

---

<sup>i</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 28

<sup>ii</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Gregory Elliott, London 2005, p. 422

supported by



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL