Gabriel Hartley
Floorlines

15th November to 21st December 2024

"Drawing breath": The face of Orson Welles on a postcard is fixed to glass, his thickening beard and furrowed brow eyeing the state of Gabriel Hartley's studio. The kitchen behind is plunged in darkness. Brushes sit in the sink drying as rolled tenjiku cotton waits to be stapled to a wall. The room where Welles lives is an odd mix of material. Polaroid photographs spread across a desk are like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle as each one is arranged in a careful line with a block of carefully chosen wood. Images of the apartment mix with imagery from outside. Liminal imagery borders the real, as it does the imaginary and the absurd. Polaroids are treated with metal-oxide pigment and detritus from the floor pressed into the gossamer of photo emulsion. The last film Welles directed was just as complex and no less subversive, telling the story of another film nearing completion — both films were titled *The Other Side of the Wind*. Its 'fictional' director J.J. "Jake" Hannaford, like Welles himself living on borrowed time, is seen weathering the storm of showing his film to an assembled crowd unsure of what they are witnessing. Both directors stare at their surroundings until what they see stares back with force and purpose. But as Hannaford concedes in a rare moment of lucidity, "maybe you can stare too hard at something — drain out the virtue, suck out the living juice."

Hartley's paintings and furniture spread throughout his studio feast on its proscenium. A legless studio chair bent double is wrought with colour from the tatami floor where the painter sits and stares at his own work. Paintings are laid flat across the matting as colour seeps through the cotton. Lines are pushed back and forth through the cotton as it's turned over and over again. *Willow Alley* (2024) is stapled to the wall, then turned until it hangs upside down. The painting is a fog of pastel shades and mottled texture named after Yanagi Kōji, a winding backstreet near the local train station once home to the counterculture movement of the 1960s. Several red marks focus the eye like tail lights in the distance seen cutting through fog and oncoming traffic. The image of speeding through rain tearing through oncoming traffic appears in an early draft of *The Other Side of the Wind,* with a voiceover offering a precautionary warning of its own alongside the picture of a sports car twisted and torn by fire. But does that comparison suck the life from painting? Names of free association — *Dust Tide, Train Notes, Rose Cloud, Breeze Bronze, Wisteria Woods, Tomorrow Star* — can send the mind spinning and elevate what might otherwise be a photographic voiceover or graphic full stop. The names are borrowed from backstreets or shy-looking buildings nearby where the studio becomes a black book of misfits and outcasts longing for connection. They locate the world on the other side of the studio window away from the jostle of brush strokes.

Movements back and forth, pushing colour into cotton on one side and removing it on the other, continues in the blistering summer heat. Ceramics are brought back to cool from kilns in the countryside to the north only to be remodelled. The flat glazed ceramic clay undulates with folds and creases seen bearing the same brush marks that hurtle across their surface and bring each piece to life. Some are slipped beneath cotton which started life as one type of painting to then glisten as the combined materials form a screen at times animated with projected video. Slipping one material into another breaks up the conventional ways and means of making pottery aiming for a new, even revolutionary way to stimulate and distract an audience. The screen has long been seen as malleable material. In 1930, the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein called on Hollywood studios to adopt a screen that was neither vertical nor horizontal but square, giving an audience the ultimate cinematic experience. He argued that instead of being inert the screen could learn from Japanese painting by adapting to the landscape of an image. The painter Hokusai adapted woodblock prints to the Japanese landscape, vertical one moment and horizontal the next where vertical street scenes end with Mount Fuji and battle scenes unravel from side to side. Hartley expresses that frenetic twist by adding waves of fevered colour pushing and pulling the canvas in different directions with each painting frazzled and exhausted in the process. Eisenstein's eye for precision and Hokusai's careful geometry are replaced by incidental light crashing through Hartley's studio and strangely familiar names given to each of his works, names as alien to paintings as they are to the fugue state of his *Neighbourhood* (2024), the sound of *Whispers* (2024) and *Distant Thunder* (2024). There are moments when the studio, now fully aware of the local landscape, even locates Welles and his film within its periphery. The white Porsche at the end of *The Other Side of the Wind* seen driving into the desert is now mirrored by an antique Porsche in brilliant white parked further up the street. That fugue of his studio also appears in every nook and cranny. Enlarged

blocks of colour in *Prime Bliss* and *Drunken walk home* (both 2024) saturate a floor and tatami screaming with euphoria. The mood of the middle room is sombre by comparison as three monochrome photographs by Rosō Fukuhara and Brassaï taped to the wall bring everything back to earth — a tree casting its shadow across corrugated tin, reeds in an expanse of sky-reflected water, and graffiti worshipping the sun carved into stone. A sombre elevation.

The rooms empty as the dust settles and the heat subsides. Everything is either packed away or has been shipped abroad. Rooms begin to breathe again as soon as I look past a willow broom propped in the corner, past the buckets of watered down paint, past the staple gun lying on the floor, past unused polaroids and bits of broken ceramic, past the picture of Welles smoking his fat cigar with a face in brilliant silhouette; and out through the front door. The vague yet vibrant scene, inebriated by nearby buildings built when money was no object, modern castles that stand beside palatial wooden boxes wrapped in a mix of corrugated tin, plastics, and timber charred in factories far away, adds fuel to the fire of images and paintings that are alive. Just when you least expect it, their lines leap from the studio tatami floor as yet more lines and splash marks fall from each wall in the time it takes to catch a breath. But the biggest and most surprising mark of all comes when everything has gone and is no longer there. Like that moment in *Citizen Kane* when the camera pulls back to reveal a warehouse withering in scale and then pushes in on the real *Rosebud* drawing its last breath, burning with the rest of what's thrown away.

Stuart Munro

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Gabriel Hartley b. 1981 in London, UK, lives and works in Tokyo, Japan. He graduated from the Royal Academy Schools with a Post-Graduate Diploma in 2008. Previously he received a BA from Chelsea College of Art and Design.

Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include June Art Fair, Basel, Swtizerland (2024); Mosslight, Hagiwara Projects, Tokyo, Japan (2023); Liquid Cities, Goya Curtain, Tokyo, Japan (2023); and Skies, Seventeen, London, UK (2022). Institutional shows include Biennial of Painting, Museum Dhont-Dhaenens, Ghent, Belgium (2024); The Sleeping Procession, CASS Projects, Cass Sculpture Foundation, Goodwood, UK (2018); "… ma l'amor mio non muore.", Casa Museo Ivan Bruschi, Arezzo, Italy (2016).