

# FRESTONIAN GALLERY

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**CHRISTIAN HIDAKA / TOM HOWSE / NICK JENSEN**

**THE STAGE MORE BEHOLDING**

**Private View: Wednesday 11th March, 6-9pm | Exhibition Dates: 12th March – 25th April 2020**

The title of this exhibition – the first at Frestonian Gallery for each of the three artists exhibited – is derived from a treatise by the English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626) not on art but on love. The phrase itself specifically relates to the way in which ‘the stage’ may separate out the sirens and the furies – sharpening and refining the qualities of comedy and tragedy that blur so indistinctly in life. Within each of the paintings on display there is both a refining of the notion of the clearly ‘staged scene’, and also a celebration of the ambiguity of ‘real life’ – of the nature and sensation of memory and narrative.

The most literally connected with this latter subject is the work of **Christian Hidaka**. In his exquisitely executed paintings, painstakingly rendered in gradually built-up layers of oil tempera, Hidaka creates sharply defined yet seemingly mysterious scenes. The two paintings featured can, however, be slowly decoded. Not, as in renaissance painting, by reference to ‘objective’ symbology of objects (gourds and fruit referring to fecundity and so forth) but rather by the artists’ own memories and associations. The ‘Marabout’ described in his painting of the same name refers directly to a tomb depicted in Matisse’s *Les Marocaines* (1916), and the inclusion of Matisse’s beloved violin (and its impending destruction by the truncheon-wielding harlequin) are symbols of the clash between Matisse and the rising artistic movement of Cubism (spearheaded by Picasso, in whose work the harlequin was a recurring motif). The specificity of symbology is perhaps even more acute in Hidaka’s work *Brichoux Harlequin* (2017) – wherein the central figure, another harlequin, is a visual unpicking of the memories associated with the material of the painting itself. Hidaka writes in explanation:

*Brichoux is the place where the yellow ochre pigment I made the costume with, is from. The girl depicted is also the person who gave me this pigment, so it was a tribute to her and her family who owned the ochre factory in burgundy which produced this particular yellow. Ochre is one of the oldest pigments whose use dates back to the Neanderthals. The boat she carries in her hand is derived from a tattoo she has in reality, on her arm.*

Realising the non-random nature of the symbols and compositions held within these theatrical tableaux (his larger paintings have a distinctly operatic feel) it is not hard to understand that Hidaka has an abiding fascination with the visualisation of memory. The concept of the *Loci* or ‘mind palace’ describes this use of the visual imagination to preserve complex memories, and dates at least as far back as the Ancient Greek oral storytelling tradition. Another system informing Hidaka’s method may be that of the subconscious’ distillation and sorting of memory – and even in problem solving (as WHR Rivers outlines in his 1923 ‘Conflict and Dream’ where conceptual dilemmas are given physical form as objects and dramatic situations to be considered and sometimes rearranged into more harmonious compositions to resolve inner conflict).

The peeling back of layer upon layer of meaning in Hidaka’s work could continue ad infinitum it seems – and in a much more physically immediate sense – the same is true of the work of **Nick Jensen**. The torn, collaged, latex and spirit doused surfaces of Jensen’s paintings seem at first glance to be an almost violent proposition, yet the images that swim to these fractured surfaces are both delicate and strangely beautiful.

Jensen's practice appears to owe something to the aesthetic of the fresco, and the fragmented nature of the image that is incomplete yet somehow all the more powerful for it. In his process of cutting, tearing and reconstructing the ground of his paintings, Jensen creates intriguingly ambiguous 'backgrounds' to his tableaux – though in truth the surface itself is no less the foreground than the more overt / recognisable images depicted. The imagery itself is a combination of the referential and the imagined – certain tropes and motifs from renaissance & modern painting half appear and dissolve into the gatherings and arrangements. Like the fractured frescos they call to mind, Jensen's works have an almost spectral quality.

Somewhere between the geometrically precise and crisply delineated spaces of Hidaka's and the rough-hewn and undulating surfaces of Jensen's, there is a point that the work of **Tom Howse** inhabits. Of the three painters gathered in the show Howse is perhaps the most knowingly playful and light-footed in his employment of imagery, which again is both found and imagined; symbological and incidental. Many of Howse's paintings feature figures that are at once familiar and indistinct. Neither self-portraits nor immutable 'characters', Howse's figures wend and weave their way through lusciously painted landscapes and interiors. Coy, mischievous and often simply unknowable expressions, such as in the work *Birdwatching*, glint out from the often vast expanses of his paintings, inviting, or perhaps challenging, the gathered audience to make whatever they will of the scene presented to them. Occasionally these silent narrators are absent altogether, as in the exquisitely realised *Plants in the Nave* – leaving us alone with our thoughts of what the arrangement may signify.

When constructing these scenes Howse does not rely solely on the process of constructing one discernible narrative, instead introducing further visual elements that may at first seem out of context (whatever 'in context' might mean in such hallucinatory surroundings). In this way the 'stages' become inhabited with visualised recollections and discoveries – a literary reference here, an image from childhood there. The perfect interweaving of these elements, leaving us drawn in yet just disoriented enough, is what allows Howse to leave such vivid and entrancing images on the mind of the viewer.

Three painters, radically different stylistically, each sharing a single stage by the creation of their own individual stages, each forming and communicating a unique sense of the world(s) into which we are invited. These are paintings that all in their own way seem to reside within the realm of the dramatic, to be both readable and unknowable; to exist somewhere on the edge of memory.

**Christian Hidaka** was born in 1977 in Noda, Japan. He has held solo exhibitions at MNAC Bucharest (RO), CAC Le Grand Cafe, CAC La Synagogue de Delme (both France) and featured in group shows at MAK Vienna, Musée des Beaux Arts Corsica, MUDAM Luxembourg and the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. His work is held in collections such as MUDAM Collection (LUX), FRAC Pays de la Loire (FR), FRAC Corse (FR), Frederick R. Weisman Collection (USA), The Saatchi Gallery (UK), UBS Collection (UK), Centre National des Arts Plastiques (FR), The Israel Museum (IL), Sigg Collection (CH) and the Zabudowicz Trust (UK).

**Tom Howse** was born in Chester in 1988, studied at Wimbledon College of Art, and has exhibited widely across Europe since graduating in 2011. Recent shows include *Precambrian Swamp Jazz* (solo) at Galleri Opdahl (Stavanger, Norway) and *I must be Seeing Things* at Ratskeller Galerie (Berlin). His work is held in prominent collections including the Saatchi Gallery (London). He was shortlisted for the Caitlin Prize, and in 2018 was one of the five winners of the John Moores Painting Prize (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).

**Nick Jensen** was born in London in 1984. He studied at Central St Martins, and at Chelsea School of Art and Design, graduating in 2010. He has recently exhibited at Parlour Gallery (London), Union Gallery (London & Berlin), Sid Motion Gallery (London) and with Kristian Day Fine Art (UK) and Slate Projects (London). He is additionally an independent curator (previously of Twelve Around One Gallery) and filmmaker.