

This text accompanied the first version of the exhibition at David Dale Gallery in Glasgow.

Only with a light touch will you write well, freely and fast

France-Lise McGurn & Matthew Musgrave

Despite working primarily across painting, McGurn and Musgrave's practices are congruous not through their shared medium, but through a commonality in processing subject, and the translation of narratives to the viewer. Through exploiting painting's specificities, McGurn and Musgrave work through aspects of abstraction in distinct and parallel paths, developing highly subjective practices from shared cultures and experiences. Glyphs, handled in gestural cursive, occur in both McGurn and Musgrave's works. Recognisable as symbols, symbols that must have an inherent meaning, though postpone interpretation – potentially offering access to a narrative of subjects if you can ascertain the key.

Encountering an undecipherable script is disorientating, knowing these mute symbols have information to share, but just not with you. The elusive definitions, just out of reach, find an ally in attempts to construct new languages. A comparable endeavour is the Shavian Alphabet, George Bernard Shaw's eponymous construct designed by Kingsley Read. The title of the exhibition, *Only with a light touch will you write well, freely and fast* coming from Read's *Suggestions for writing* appendix to the Shavian Alphabet edition of *Androcles and The Lion*. There's a naïve optimism in trying to supplant the Latin alphabet for a range of new marks, whether practical as shorthand or more ideological such as the Shavian alphabet – the intention is almost utopian. It is this desire for brevity, economy and potency in conveying information that is reflected within the practices of McGurn and Musgrave. The distillation of subject and experiences to a series of signifiers, synecdoches which offer insight to a broader condition.

The attempts of invented alphabets, one being Shavian, towards brevity and universality are visibly more potent in ideograms – despite being ultimately the product of the culture it is employed to express, like all language. McGurn's use of references is characterised by this immediacy, imagery as loaded yet economical in means that it takes on the role of an ideogram. The dissonance of interpretations within these culturally weighted images however, is subject at play in McGurn's practice – drawn from a bank of source material collected from public information adverts, pulp fiction, school textbooks among varying other sources, the characters used in the service of selling shampoo or warning of the dangers of sexual promiscuity are tropes, intended to convey a message in expedient means. But there is a dis-harmony between readings. The ambiguity of the characters removed from their context, and shifting cultural standards now offer new interpretations to these pictographs. As McGurn collates cultural tropes from media, Musgrave constructs an archive of experiences and accidental constructs from which to develop. These could be considered indexed as opposed to McGurn's uncharacterised assimilation, Musgrave creates typographies of contexts - only occasionally made explicit through titling, both seeming opaque until realisation dawns. The application throughout the paintings fluctuates, as does palette and scale, though they are united by a defined set of subjects - limbs metonymic for dancers, smoke for the smoker.

Although there is a divergence in approach and subject between the two artists' work - complimentary as it is - the glyphs or scripts visible in part remain throughout, suggestive rather than prescriptive. Not necessarily taking similar or repeated forms, yet recognisable as entrance to further engagement. It could be characterised as a calligraphy of gesture, in which, as with sinographic scripts, the spaces are as important as the symbols. A performative reduction at play within symbols employed to signify further symbols – subject and means of delivery converging briefly before separating once more.

Max Slaven