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“THE DESIRE OF THINGS TO MOVE AGAINST GRAVITY” SAM LEACH

Review by Michael Young
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The concept of a bat box or bat house takes on a whole new meaning in Australian artist Sam Leach’s latest show at Sullivan+Strumpf gallery in Sydney. His ongoing environmental concerns led him to make bat-box installations—*House for Bats with Magenta* and *House for Bats with Blue* (both 2015)—during a recent residency at Omi International Art Centre (OIAC) in upstate New York. Two prototypes of these wooden boxes currently hang at Sullivan+Strumpf. The exterior of one is painted on with two magenta circles, while the other has a diagonal race-stripe in faded blue. Several of Leach’s bat boxes will also form an installation to be exhibited next year at OIAC’s outdoor space, Fields Sculpture Park. “The idea is to allow the animals to express an aesthetic preference between the different designs,” Leach told *ArtAsiaPacific* during the exhibition opening at Sullivan+Strumpf. I did wonder whether he was being tongue-in-cheek.

The Melbourne-based artist graduated university in 1991, with an economics degree, and went to work for the Australian Tax Office (ATO), where for 12 years he labored under the yoke of figures, calculations and pie charts. Art was something that Leach did part time. Eventually, though, the moment arrived when the studio beckoned and he plunged full time into the laissez-faire world of art, in lieu of a life predicated on the discipline of economics.

Irregular pay checks, concomitant insecurities and irrational collectors all play a part in the life of an artist; yet there are no vague elements in Leach's practice. His works are based on a solid, theoretical underpinning that draws on the contrived world of 17th-century Dutch landscape painting and the rigors of mid-20th-century formalism, where form and style come together along with an attractive, cool detachment.



Spatial incongruity—as seen in the large, multi-panel, monochromatic canvas of *Direction of Travel with Time Reversed* (2015)—explored with a deft and light, painterly style, lurks everywhere in Leach's world of intellectual conceits. His landscapes are almost exclusively painted from photographs that he has taken himself, and they are often punctuated with minute, human figures wearing laboratory suits—as though they had just stepped into an apocalyptic world—or with animals that articulate Leach's environmental concerns. Yet the softly depicted landscape is interrupted by a harsh diagonal line, in the same faded color as his blue bat box, which slashes across the image. The clear message here is that none of us are doing enough to preserve the natural world. Leach's years spent at the ATO seems to have left a mark on the artist; pie charts, graphs and ascending lines that appear on the surface of his paintings—which he refers to as “data visualization”—add an abstract, geometric discipline to his contrived world.

Leach seems only to paint either small, individual panels or large-scale, multi-panel works. The grid created by the panels' abutment becomes an intrinsic element of the overall composition—almost to the point where the viewer feels that they are looking through a window onto a world that exists only within the artist's imagination. It is an impression that is reinforced by the shellac finish that Leach applies to his painted surfaces to create a mirror-like effect. Leach's work requires time from its viewers to appreciate the artist's concerns regarding composition, modernity and mannerism, which he presents with great facility by conveying a world reduced to an endangered commodity, and subjected to ongoing scientific and economic evaluation through human agency. It will be interesting to hear from Leach next year about which patterns the bats prefer for their new American homes. "I have only offered them two choices – variations of my own paintings. They can see, but not that well," Leach said again at the Sullivan+Strumpf opening. And I am still not sure if he was being tongue-in-cheek.

"Sam Leach: The Desire of Things to Move Against Gravity" is on view at Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney, until September 26.

